A More Perfect Union: Judaism & American Democracy

Facilitator’s Guide
“If not now, when?” – Hillel (Pirkei Avot 1:14)

At this historic moment, now is the time for us as Americans, as Jews, and, most importantly, as American Jews to have thoughtful, serious conversations about our role in supporting American democracy.

While those discussions may go in different directions, they start with a simple question: **What’s my role in supporting American democracy?**

In this box you will find a series of tools designed to help you explore how Jewish wisdom can inform your thinking about this question with friends and colleagues, and to consider the implications for your personal and professional lives.

These tools are intended to reinforce one another, but each can also be used independently.

**Chavruta Prompts**

The early rabbis taught that one should not discuss certain topics with more than one other person (Mishnah Chagigah 2:1). Their deep insight was that exploring issues of such importance requires a heightened level of intimacy and trust; and Chavruta – the form of dyad learning they embraced – is a time-tested modality for such discussions.

1. Divide your group into pairs.

2. Ask both members of each pair to answer each of the Chavruta Prompts out loud, using the Chavruta Prompt booklet included in this box.

   **Chavruta Prompt Discussion**
   - Tell your life story in one minute
   - When have you participated in American democracy in a way that felt personal? How did that change your feelings about being American or being Jewish?
   - Describe an experience that made you question something that you had held in certainty.
   - Which American values are most important to you? What experiences made them so?

3. Encourage them to take turns sharing, and to listen fully when the other is speaking.

4. Remind them that what they share with each other is confidential unless they give each other permission to share with others.
A More Perfect Union: The Card Game

A More Perfect Union is a card game designed to be played in groups of 3-10 people.

Components
- **One set of Judaism cards**
  70 orange cards each featuring a Jewish concept or historical reference. Four blank cards are also included for you to add your own content.
- **One set of Democracy cards**
  20 blue cards each featuring a symbol or central concept of democracy. Four blank cards are also included for you to add your own content.
- **One set of Voting cards**
  10 yellow cards for voting at the end of each round.

Set Up
- Distribute five Judaism cards and one Voting card to each player.
- Place the remaining Judaism cards face down in one pile and the Democracy cards face down in another pile at the center of the playing surface.

Gameplay
1. The person whose birthday is soonest after July 4th flips over a Democracy card so that everyone can see it.

2. All players review the Judaism cards in their hands, and each player selects one that is most relevant to the Democracy card that is showing. Note that “relevant” in this case may require a fair bit of creativity!

3. Moving clockwise - beginning with the player who flipped the Democracy card - each player makes a case as to why her or his respective Judaism card is most relevant to the Democracy card at play. Players leave their cards face up on the playing surface.

4. Once all players have made their case, each player gives a Voting card to the player whose explanation she or he found most compelling. The player who receives the most Voting cards keeps the Democracy card that was played and returns the Voting cards to the rest of the players.

5. The Judaism cards that were played are then returned to the bottom of the Judaism card pile and all players draw a new Judaism card.

6. Moving clockwise from the last player who flipped a Democracy card, the next player flips a Democracy card and the steps above repeat.

7. The winner is the player who has obtained the most Democracy cards after all rounds have been completed.
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Chavruta Prompts
Step 1
Please sit with one partner and use this booklet as a guide for your conversation.
Tell your life story in one minute.
(1 minute each)

Step 2
When have you participated in American democracy in a way that felt personal? How did that change your feelings about being American or being Jewish?
(2 minutes each)

Step 3
Describe an experience that made you question something that you had held in certainty.
(2 minutes each)

Step 4
Which American values are most important to you? What experiences made them so?
When you are done, please gather in the full group for the next segment of the activity.
(2 minutes each)
T’rumah
Contribution to the Tabernacle

In the Biblical telling of the construction of the Tabernacle, each Israelite voluntarily contributed gold and other materials.

(Exodus 35:29)

Machatzit Hashekel
Half Shekel Tax to the Tabernacle.

Each Israelite was required to pay an annual tax of a shekel toward the maintenance of the Tabernacle.

(Exodus 30:12-16)

Mashiach
Messiah

The Jewish people envision a future in which the world is perfected.

Minyan
Quorum

Many Jewish rituals and prayers require a quorum of ten Jews.

Leket, Shichechah, Pe’ah
Gleanings, Forgotten Sheaves, and Corners

Land owners are required to set aside for the poor any grain that falls during the harvest, any sheaves that are forgotten, and a dedicated corner of the field.

(Leviticus 23:22)

Tzedakah
Charity

Jews are obligated to give to those in need.

Luach Ivri
Jewish Calendar

Classically, a new month begins when two witnesses testify that both have seen a new moon - even if the date is obviously wrong according to astronomical calculations.

(Arami, Rosh Hashana 2:8-9)

Arevim Zeh Ba’zeh
Mutual Responsibility

All people are responsible for one another - both for the positive and for the negative.

(Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 27b)

Sukkah

During the holiday of Sukkot, Jews sit in a temporary dwelling to commemorate their wandering during the Exodus from Egypt and living in the fields during the fall harvest.
George Washington’s Letter to Touro Synagogue

In a letter to one of the oldest Jewish communities in the U.S., Washington wrote: “May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

(Exodus 23:10-11; Deuteronomy 15:1-6)

Tzelem Elohim
Created in the Divine Image

Each human is created in the form of Adam so that no person can say, “My ancestry is greater than yours.”

(Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)

Bar and Bat Mitzvah

Young Jews participate in a rite of passage in which they assume communal responsibilities.

Sh’mitah
Sabbatical Year

During the sabbatical year, the land is left to lie fallow and all agricultural activity is forbidden. In addition, all debts, except those of foreigners, are forgiven.

(Exodus 23:10-11; Deuteronomy 15:1-6)

Shabbat
Sabbath

Jews refrain from work on the seventh day of the week.

(Arei Miklat
Cities of Refuge

The ancient Israelites designated cities of refuge in which someone who killed another accidentally could hide and avoid the vengeance of the dead person’s relatives.

(Deuteronomy 4:41-42)

K’tivat Sefer Torah
Writing a Torah Scroll

“With regard to the mitzvah for every Jew to write a Torah scroll, even if a person’s ancestors bequeathed a Torah scroll, it is a mitzvah to write a scroll of one’s own.”

(Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 21b)

K’dushat Haguf
Sanctity of the Body

Hillel used to say, “Just like regarding the statues of kings, that are set up in the theaters and the circuses, the one who is appointed over them bathes them and scrubs them... I, who was created in the divine image and form...even more so!”

(Vayikra Rabbah 34:3)
Kavod Hatorah
Respect for Torah

“If one stands before those who study the Torah, is it not all the more so true that one should stand before the Torah itself?”

(Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 33b)

Hachra’at Harov
Majority Rules

In classical Jewish law, judicial decisions are made by a majority of judges.

(Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 11a)

Mashal Hasfinah
Parable of the Boat

“Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught a parable about a group of people who were on a ship. One of them started drilling a hole. The others said to him, ‘What are you doing?!’ He responded, ‘What do you care? Am I not drilling beneath my own seat?’ They said, ‘The water will start rising and drown the whole boat.’”

(Vayikra Rabbah 4:6)

Chuppah
Wedding Canopy

Jewish weddings traditionally take place under a wedding canopy.

Shivah
During the first week after a person is buried, the mourners remain at home and receive condolences and comfort from friends and family.

Ma’aser
Tithing

In classical times, Jews were obligated to give one tenth of their agricultural produce to the Priests and Levites.

Hashavat Avediah
Returning Lost Objects

Jews are obligated to return lost objects to their rightful owners.

Ger Toshav
Resident Alien

A person who is not Jewish but accepts the Noachide Laws (seven universally applicable laws) is welcomed as a resident of the land of Israel with certain defined rights.

(Avodah Zarah 64b)

Mikveh
Ritual Bath

Jews immerse in a ritual bath to mark transitions between significant life moments.
Tanuro Shel Achnai
The Oven of Achnai

In a dispute about the purity of a particular type of oven, Rabbi Eliezer tried to convince the other rabbis of his position through supernatural divine intervention. The rabbis were not persuaded, however, noting that Torah “is not in heaven.”

(Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b)

Z’rizin Makdimin
Taking Initiative

When the Israelites were making donations for the building of the Tabernacle, the tribal chiefs said they would wait until the end and give whatever was still required. The Israelites gave with such generosity, however, that there was almost nothing left for the chiefs to give.

(Sifrei Bamidbar 7:3)

Zechar L’yitziyat Mitzrayim
Memory of the Exodus

“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.”

(Deuteronomy 15:15)

Issur Ribit
Prohibition on Interest

Jews are prohibited from charging interest on loans to other Jews.

(Exodus 22:24)

Aliyah L’regel
Pilgrimage Holidays

On three holidays each year - Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot - all Jewish men were expected to make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem.

(Deuteronomy 17:7)

Casting the First Stone

Witnesses who testify against someone convicted in a capital case must initiate the execution themselves.

(Exodus 22:24)

Parshanut
Exegesis

In Jewish tradition, texts are constantly interpreted, reinterpreted, and interpreted again.

Multiplicity of Voices

The Talmud records the perspectives of more than 1,500 people (nearly all of them men), often with differing views, and many times not designating one as correct.

(Deuteronomy 20:1-9)

Exemptions from Conscription

The Torah exempts many people from going to battle, including those who have built a new house but not yet lived in it, those who have planted a vineyard but not yet enjoyed it, and those who have gotten engaged but not yet married.
Lashon Hara
Slander

Jews are prohibited from speaking poorly about others, regardless of whether what they’re saying is true.

Hotza’at Dibah
Defamation

Jews are prohibited from making false statements that harm the reputation of individuals, businesses, products, or groups.

Tochechah
Rebuke

The obligation to rebuke others about their wrongdoing is tempered by the awareness that few people are able to give or to hear criticism productively.

(Babylonian Talmud, Arachin 16b)

B’rov Am Hadrat Melech
“In multitudes there is glorification of the king”

Mitzvot/commandments are to be performed in the presence of as large a gathering as possible, with the intention of providing the greatest honor possible.

(Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 64b)

Dina
D’malchuta Dina
“The Law of the Land is the Law”

There is a rabbinic dictum that the law of the country is binding, and, in certain cases, takes precedence over Jewish law.

(Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 113a)

Dan L’kaf Z’chut
Giving the Benefit of the Doubt

There is an obligation to judge others favorably.

(Pirkei Avot 1:6)

Goyim
Nations

The Hebrew word goyim literally means “nations,” but is often used to describe non-Jews, usually derogatorily.

Siyyum
Completion

When Jews complete a unit of study, they celebrate by sharing some of what they’ve learned with their community.

Mechitzah
Separation

Some Jewish communities use a barrier to separate the sexes during prayer services.
G’neivat Da’at
Deception
“Shmuel said: It is prohibited to deceive people, and even to deceive a gentile.”
(Talmud Chullin 94a)

Lifnei Iver
“Do not put a stumbling block before the blind”
Jews are prohibited from misleading people, both literally and metaphorically.
(Leviticus 19:14)

Bikkurim
First Fruits
In classical times, Jews were obligated to bring the first fruits of their fields to the Temple.
(Deuteronomy 26:1-11)

Yehareg V’al Ya’avor
Martyrdom
Although rare, there are instances in which Jewish law mandates sacrificing one’s own life rather than violating a religious prohibition.
(Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 74a)

B’rit
Covenant
The binding promises made between people, or between people and God, form an ongoing committed relationship or community.

Chavruta
Learning Dyad
Jewish pedagogy emphasizes the value of learning that occurs when two people engage in dialogue over a shared text.

Kehillot
The Kehillot were legally autonomous corporations of Jews in European feudal states that organized each Jewish community’s educational, religious, administrative, social, medical, and penal services.

Pittsburgh Platform
In 1885, the American Reform movement declared that Jews “consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community.”

Goldine Medine
During mass European Jewish immigration to the U.S., many Yiddish-speaking Jews referred to America as the “golden country.”
The Israeli Declaration of Independence

On May 14, 1948, Israel was established as both a Jewish and a democratic state.

T'shuvah

Return

Jewish wisdom offers elaborate guidance for how people should take responsibility and repent for their actions.

(Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 37a)

Nachshon

An ancient tradition explains that Nachshon jumped into the Sea of Reeds before the waters split - taking an initiative that nobody else would.

Na'aseh V'nishmah

“We will do, and we will hear”

When the Israelites accepted the Torah, they agreed to its terms before knowing what they were.

Tishkach Yemini

May My Right Hand Wither

In a 1909 meeting of organized labor that began the Uprising of the 20,000, the crowd of predominately Jewish women revised the traditional oath of “If I forget thee O Jerusalem...” to “If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may my right hand wither from the arm I raise.”

Tikkun Olam

Repairing the World

Many American Jews have adapted the ancient notion that human beings are partners with God in repairing the world’s brokenness to a broad commitment to social justice.

Two Pockets

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha, Poland (1765-1827) taught that one should always carry around one note in each pocket: One should read, “I am but dust and ashes;” the other, “The world was created for me.”

Praying With Your Legs

Describing his participation in the 1965 civil rights march in Selma, Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “Our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.”
Machloket L’Shem Shamayim
Argument for the Sake of Heaven

Jewish tradition values debate in pursuit of the truth.

Sh’foch Chamatcha
Pour Out Your Wrath

These words begin a prayer recited at the Pesach Seder, in which Jews ask God to take revenge on their enemies.

Elu V’elu
These and Those

The Talmud embraces the notion that contradictory opinions can both be valid.

Haskalah
Enlightenment

As European Jews gained greater political rights in the 18th and 19th centuries, many started to explore ways of integrating Jewish and non-Jewish ideas.

Leyt Atar Panuy Mineih
“There is no place devoid of the divine”

Starting in the 18th century, the Hassidic movement popularized the ancient Jewish mystical belief that all of existence is imbued with divinity.

Neder
Vow

If one makes a voluntary pledge, one is obligated to fulfill it.

(Numbers 30:3)
Mered Korach
Rebellion of Korach

Korach challenged Moshe's authority by saying, "Aren't we all holy?"

(Numbers 16:3)

Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai

In resolving the many disputes between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, the Talmud generally sides with Beit Hillel because they would present Beit Shammai's views before arguing for their own.

(Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b)
States’ Rights

The principle that powers not Constitutionally assigned to the federal government belong to the states.

Freedom of the Press
Civil Society
The array of non-governmental organizations through which citizens collectively express their interests.

Elections

Informed Citizenry
A populace that uses reliable information from multiple sources to understand the world and to make informed decisions.

Freedom of Speech

Pledge of Allegiance

Due Process
The government’s obligation to respect all legal rights owed to a person.

Provide for the General Welfare

Right to Bear Arms