

An Introduction to the Religious Action Center and Reform Jewish Social Justice

60 minutes

Preparation for L'Taken Social Justice Seminars



Goals

- Have students understand what social justice is and articulate different ways to pursue it
- Students will explore the relationship between Judaism and social justice through study and learning about what the RAC does
- Encourage students to understand how they can and will implement social justice work

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| 0:00-0:15 | Set Induction: Exploring our own Pursuit of Social Justice Alternative Intro Activity: Ordering Social Justice Values (located at the end of the program) |
| 0:15-0:21 | "50 Years of Social Justice: RAC 50th Anniversary Tribute Video" Part 1 |
| 0:22-0:35 | Video Discussion: Contemporary Talmud |
| 0:35-0:41 | "50 Years of Social Justice: RAC 50th Anniversary Tribute Video" Part 2 |
| 0:41-0:50 | Video Discussion: Setting Priorities |
| 0:50-0:60 | Conclusion: Write Your Own Commentary about Justice |

Materials:

- "50 Years of the Religious Action Center: A Tribute" Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_kgZCEKlso
- Computer with internet access
- Projector
- Copies of appendix A- each value cut into slips and placed in an envelope (Appendix A)
- Copies of Contemporary Talmud Sheet (Appendix B)

0:00-0:15 Set Induction: Exploring our own Pursuit of Social Justice

Read the following statements and ask the students to stand if the statement is "true" and remain seated if the statement is "false." (Alternatively, place a sign that says "true" and "false" on opposite ends of the room; tell students to stand under the appropriate poster). Feel free to select only some of the statements.

- a. I have read a book or a newspaper article about a social justice issue that I care about
- b. I have served food at a homeless shelter
- c. I have helped to clean up a park
- d. I have written a letter to or lobbied my Senators or Representative
- e. I have written a letter to or lobbied my local elected officials
- f. I have given money to *tzedakah*
- g. I have donated to a charity that focuses on a cause that I care about
- h. I participate in community service projects on a regular basis
- i. I have attended a rally or demonstration
- j. I have written a letter to the editor of a newspaper

- k. I have done some form of advocacy around a piece of legislation
- l. I plan to vote in the first election after I turn 18
- m. I have taught someone else about a social justice issue that I care about
- n. I engage in the pursuit of social justice
- o. I can influence my congresspeoples' votes on legislation
- p. My Jewish upbringing and/or education informs my social justice work
- q. My opinions can make a difference.
- r. I can change the world

Discussion Questions:

- What did you notice about your answers in relation to others' answers?
- How would you define direct service? Advocacy? *Tzedakah*? Education? How do each of these actions fit into the pursuit of social justice?
- What types of social justice activities do people in the class engage in most frequently?
- What are the benefits of direct service? What is the impact? What are the benefits of advocacy? What is the impact?
- Given a limited amount of time, which of these types of social justice (advocacy, *tzedekah*, education, etc.) would you choose to participate in? Why?

Read (or summarize) the following passage:

- Advocacy can be a difficult piece of the struggle for social justice when you don't feel like you have the knowledge or resources to learn about specific legislation or the tools to contact your members of Congress. But, advocacy is a powerful tool for effecting systemic change that can have a huge impact on our nation and the world. That's why we are traveling to Washington, D.C. to learn more about the political process and the ways that we can get involved. Our trip is organized by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, also known as the RAC—the Reform Jewish Movement's Washington office. The following video will give you a better sense of the RAC's work.

0:15-0:22 "50 Years of Social Justice: RAC 50th Anniversary Tribute Video" Part 1

The video can be [streamed via YouTube](#). You will need internet access, a computer, and a projector. Stream minutes 00:00-06:50 here.

0:22-0:35 Video Discussion: Contemporary Talmud

Divide students into small groups and, using the attached Contemporary Talmud sheet, facilitate a discussion about the video and the Jewish imperative to pursue justice. Explain that studying this Contemporary Talmud is a way to explore ancient and modern Jewish teachings on a subject. It is modeled after a page of Talmud, where the biblical text at the center of the page is surrounded by rabbinic commentaries.

Below are questions to inspire conversation about the Contemporary Talmud and the video:

- When have you heard the teaching "Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue"? What does it mean? How do the other Jewish texts on the page help us understand what it means to pursue justice?
- Rabbi Saperstein, former RAC Director, declares the "The work of social justice is holy work" and Naomi Abelson, former URJ Social Action Specialist, declares that "Social activism is a tool through which we express our faith." Why is the pursuit of justice a Jewish behavior? Do you feel that you

are doing holy work when you are engaging in direct service, advocacy, *tzedakah* or education? Does any one of these methods feel holier than the others?

- The prophet Jeremiah tells us “do not wrong... the orphan and the widow” and Isaiah tells us to “uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.” What is the difference? Why are the orphan and the widow singled out?
- Rabbi Danny Freeland, former URJ Senior Vice President and current President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, says that we must translate the messages of the prophets into reality. Considering the insights of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel as well as the quotes from Isaiah and Jeremiah, what do you think are the messages of the prophets? What are some examples of how you have personally translated these messages into reality?

0:35-0:41 “50 Years of Social Justice: RAC 50th Anniversary Tribute Video” Part 2

0:41-0:50 Discussion

In a large group, have students discuss these questions. We would love to hear what your students have to say about the priorities of the movement and policies they are passionate about! Feel free to email us at rac@rac.org

- Based on the video, what role does the Religious Action Center play in the pursuit of justice? What are some of the public policy issues that were mentioned? What are the policy issues that are most important to you? What do you think should be the priorities of the Reform Movement?
- Rabbi Jonathan Stein, former CCAR President, and Barbara Weinstein, RAC Associate Director, both talk about the importance of advocating for things that you care about. When have you been an advocate in the past (on a public policy issue, at your school, at your synagogue, in your home)? What makes an effective advocate? How can you apply the lessons you have learned from advocating in the past to the experience that you will have at L'Taken, lobbying on Capitol Hill?

0:50-0:60 Conclusion: Write Your Own Commentary About Justice

After students have explored the texts, ask them to write their own commentary on “Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue” in the box provided. They can write their interpretation of the passage, a reflection on a time when they were pursuing justice, a statement about the importance of fulfilling this obligation, etc. When the students have finished writing, ask each of them to share their statement with the group.

In your concluding remarks, tell the students that the Contemporary Talmud is a tool they will likely see again at the L'Taken Seminar when we explore the relationship between Jewish texts and public policy issues. Let the students know that the Seminar will be an opportunity to gain or enhance the skills that they need to be effective advocates and a chance to be a part of the Reform Movement’s efforts in pursuit of *tikkun olam*.

Tell the students that they do not have to wait for L'Taken to get involved. Encourage them to look at their own community and start doing social justice work today. Refer back to the statements at the beginning of the activity, encouraging to either do direct service, education, lobbying local officials, letter writing, or participate in any congregational social justice initiatives.

0:00-0:15: Alternate Introduction Activity: Prioritizing Social Justice Values

Put each value from Appendix A onto its own sheet of paper and place the paper in an envelope. Divide students into small groups of 3 or 4 and explain to them that each of the groups represents the Committee on Social Action, the organization responsible for setting official RAC policy. They have gathered for a meeting to discuss the next policies of the Reform Movement. Given that they only have a limited time, the RAC staff has prepared for them a number of options. Instruct students that they will have to choose just five of the values in the envelope.

Then explain that while it was great they narrowed it down to five, we only have the resources to study three of them. Have students eliminate two issues.

Then instruct students that the CSA can only draft one resolution today, and must choose just one of the remaining values to act on.

Discussion questions:

- Have each group announce what their remaining value was, and why.
- Was it easy or hard to eliminate values? Why?
- How do you think this relates to the work of social justice advocates each day? To the RAC?

Appendix A: Social Justice Values

Raising the minimum wage

Access to reproductive healthcare

Sentencing Reform

Access to voting rights

Becoming more environmentally friendly

Resettling Refugees

Limiting carbon emissions

Gun Control reform

Protecting constitutional rights

Increasing affordable housing

Mental health services reform

Veterans health care reform

Ending human trafficking

Combatting sexual assault

Combatting hate crimes

Contemporary Talmud: RAC Tribute Video

Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow.

Isaiah 1:17

It has been taught: Justice, justice shall you follow; the first [mention of justice] refers to a decision based on strict law; the second, to a compromise. How so? Where two boats sailing on a river meet; If both attempt to pass simultaneously, both will sink, whereas, if one "makes way for the other, both can pass [without mishap] ...

Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrein 32b

"Social justice is not just talking about the prophets, not just talking about how we should live our lives, but it's translating that message into reality in North American society."

Rabbi Danny Freeland, Senior Vice President, URJ (quote at 1:25)



"Social activism is really a tool through which we express our faith."
Naomi Abelson, Social Action Specialist, URJ (quote at 5:02)

"Being able to lobby and being able to have a voice and being able to articulate a Reform Jewish vision in Congress and on Capitol Hill is the single most important thing that we do to influence our country."

Rabbi Jonathan Stein, President, CCAR (quote at 3:06)

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"Justice Justice You Shall Pursue"
Deuteronomy 16:20

The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. It also became clear to me that in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, all are responsible.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

"The work of social justice is holy work."
Rabbi David Saperstein, Director, RAC
(quote at 12:33)

Thus said Adonai: Do what is just and right; rescue from the defrauder him who is robbed; do not wrong the stranger, the orphan and the widow; commit no lawless act, and do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place.

Jeremiah 22:3

The double emphasis means: Justice under any circumstance, whether to profit or loss, whether in word or in action, whether to Jew or non-Jew. It also means: Do not use unjust means to secure justice.

Bachya Ben Asher's Commentary

"Each of us... has a chance to be both a Moses, speaking up against injustice, and an Aaron, being a source of strength and support for our friends who are in the room with us, doing this work."

Barbara Weinstein, Legislative Director, RAC
(quote at 8:12)

Insert Your Own Statement on Pursuing Justice: