

## Diaspora Jews and Israel's Jewish Democracy

### Time:

An hour (if possible)

### Age:

For children aged 10+, resources questions should be adapted for what is age appropriate

### Israel & Jewish Values Connection:

Tikkun olam, taking responsibility for our actions, citizenship, being part of Am Yisrael (all Jews have a responsibility for one another)

## OBJECTIVES

- To learn about democracy.
- To learn that Jewish values are connected to democratic values.
- To learn about freedom and how that translates into our everyday lives.
- To learn about what it means to be a citizen in a democratic state e.g. we can all vote (give age appropriate examples).

## SUPPLIES NEEDED

- Paper
- Pens
- Quotes cards
- Debate cards (for children aged 15+)
- Photos of different Jewish and non-Jewish communities in Israel

## BACKGROUND PREPARATION/RESOURCES/KNOWLEDGE

Prepare yourself for running an effective activity by watching relevant videos and reading these articles. Here are some suggestions:

- [The Importance of Being an American Jew](#)
- [What's Wrong with Re-affirming Israel's Jewish and Democratic Character](#)
- [Diaspora Jews and Israel's Jewish Democracy: A World Jewry's Perspective](#)

The steps can be separate sessions, for example, discussing what democracy is and having students research various aspects of how Israel is a democratic state, can be one session, and assigning one aspect of democracy and how that is connected to Israel and Jewish values can be another session. How many sessions depends on the time and flexibility that each educator has. Students can also discuss in pairs/groups so that the lesson is expanded to include dialogue and discussion.

## ACTIVITY INTRODUCTION/GETTING STARTED

Ask children what they think freedom and democracy mean? Can they give personal examples? Discuss what it means to be a citizen (passport,vote). The educator can read out this text (if appropriate) and/or can give it out as a handout for older students.

**What is a Jewish State?** By Aharon Barak, former Supreme Court Justice

[https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/what\\_is\\_a\\_jewish\\_state/](https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/what_is_a_jewish_state/)

*"In the Land of Israel the Jewish people arose. Here its spiritual, religious and political character was forged, here it lived a life of national independence, here it created its national and universal cultural treasures and bequeathed to the entire world the eternal Book of Books."*

It is the natural right of the Jewish people to live like every other nation as a free people in its own sovereign state. A state to which every Jew is entitled to ascend and in which the ingathering of the exiles is among the most basic values.

Here is a definition of what a democratic state is - *"Recognition of the sovereignty of the people manifested in free and egalitarian elections; recognition of the nucleus of human rights, among them dignity and equality, the existence of separation of powers, the rule of law, and an independent judiciary system"*.

Israel defines itself as a parliamentary democracy: a democratic system of government in which all the citizens choose their representatives for parliament according to their political affiliation, and then the political parties choose their leaders.

While the term "democracy" is absent, Israel's Declaration of Independence states the intention to: *"Ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex: It will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations"* and appeals to *"the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions."*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is a democracy?
2. Are all countries democratic?
3. What is special about Israel being a democracy? Mention it's the only one in the region!
4. How are democratic values connected with Jewish values?
5. How does being a Jewish state impact democracy?
6. Connect with recent election - all citizens (regardless of gender and religion) can and do vote.
7. What does it mean to be a citizen?
8. What does it mean to be a virtual citizen? Talk about connection, even though don't live in the country.
9. Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East - why is this important? How do we see this?
10. How are Jewish values connected with democratic values?

Preferably show a video about democracy and discuss what freedom means to us, how we see it on a daily basis. Talk about what a Jewish state is.

NOTE: Check videos are age appropriate to select the video that best suits your learning group.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LabV7EFHHeo> - Short 3 minute video about democracy
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6jgWxkbR7A> - Short 3 minute video about democracy
- [https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/18\\_minute\\_virtual\\_citizen\\_of\\_israel\\_tour/](https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/18_minute_virtual_citizen_of_israel_tour/) - VCI video (18 minutes)

## ACTIVITY: WHAT IS A DEMOCRACY?

Instruct children to form pairs and write down their ideas.

If necessary, guide children with a prompt: "It means that I can....." and give them examples (go to school, vote, go to any supermarket I want, buy any book I want, etc. - make age appropriate).

Have children create something (a painting, picture, cards etc) which shows how Judaism and democracy share values, and also give examples of democracy in Israel, the only Jewish state in the region.

If appropriate (time/age) encourage discussion of what a democracy is not, and which countries are not democratic etc and why (e.g. Saudi Arabia).

## EVALUATION/CONCLUSION

Connect democratic values to the Jewish values of Israel.

- Q - What does it mean to be free?
- Q - How is Israel a democratic state?

Encourage children to learn more about how they can become a Virtual Citizen of Israel: <https://israelforever.org/vci/what/>

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

### Israeli Mock Government Activity:

[https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/israeli\\_mock\\_government\\_activity/](https://israelforever.org/interact/blog/israeli_mock_government_activity/)

This activity, designed for older children (high school+) will help students better understand the way Israel's democracy and government functions.

### Debate Activity - Groups:

Break the group into at least 3 teams, allowing each team to select their angle of argument.

- What right do Diaspora Jews have to be heard by Israel and her lawmakers, or by the Israeli society as a whole?
- To what extent must those living outside of Israel examine and develop their opinions with regard to the practical dilemmas Israel faces that characterize life in a "Jewish and democratic state?"
- If Israel was not a liberal democracy, would its attractiveness to many Diaspora Jews erode? In this regard, is Israel held to a different standard than other countries in the world? Why or why not?

### Debate Activity - Cards:

Print off the two debate arguments (see **Debate Activity (Cards)** below). Divide the group/class into 4 teams and have a for/against side for both debates (suggested positions are offered on each card). Afterwards, have everyone regroup and have someone from each team or debate present their findings to the others.

### Quote Card Activity:

Divide the students into groups/pairs. Each group/pair is given a quote card (see **Quote Activity (Cards)** below) with a discussion question about the quote.

Question ideas for further discussion:

- If your quote has a source, have you heard of the person being quoted? Do you know anything about them?
- Do you agree/disagree with the quote? Why?
- Is democracy linked to Judaism and Jewish values? How?



### ABOUT THE ISRAEL FOREVER FOUNDATION

The Israel Forever Foundation is an Israel Engagement Organization that develops and promotes experiential learning resources that celebrate and strengthen the personal connection to Israel as an integral part of Jewish life and identity.

We hope you have enjoyed using this resource. We greatly appreciate feedback. Please take a minute to fill out our [evaluation form](#) and help be as effective as possible in providing the resources and tools you need to make the personal Israel connection come to life, whatever the age, wherever you are in the world.

**DEBATE 1: Tackling the Concrete Tensions Between "Democracy", "Zionism," and "Judaism"**

Israel's Jewish identity is a dominant issue. Many are concerned that Israel's actions or policies and its world image have an impact on Diaspora Jews' security and wellbeing. However, the discussion has a strong tendency to be negatively-charged, overly biased and lacking foundation in consistent facts.

There are two majority opinions who generally see these values as harmonious/in agreement with each other: those who see Israel's democratic identity arising from the state's Jewish foundations, and those who emphasize the opposite arrangement. Criticism heard in the Diaspora on aspects of Israel's conduct in Jewish matters is often based on arguments rooted in democratic values, just as criticism of aspects of Israel's conduct in the democratic field are often based on arguments rooted in Jewish values.

1. The regional reality does not grant Israel immunity from criticism. Should Diaspora Jews recognize the difficulties and constraints Israel faces given the regional hostility and security threats when expressing criticism?  
SUGGESTED POSITIONS: **YES OR NO**
2. Some say Israel faces a "double standard" when being criticized, others say no such standard exists and/or that Israel should be treated differently. How important is the fact that Israel's neighbors do not adhere to principles of democracy, and arguably of human rights, as justification for lowering the high values bar Israel is expected to maintain?  
SUGGESTED POSITIONS: **IMPORTANT OR NOT IMPORTANT**
3. Israel has preserved a democratic, multi-party framework and a free and open society. Yet Israel has been pressured and maligned by foreign and domestic pressures more powerfully than other countries. Despite all its flaws, it is in Israel that free political discourse is maintained. What accounts for this difference?  
SUGGESTED POSITIONS: **RELIGION-BASED OR DEMOCRACY-BASED**

**DEBATE 2: Diaspora Jews and Israel's Democratic Identity**

Israel's identity is examined by those living outside of Israel in accordance with the following premises:

1. Israel's character has significant influence on how "Judaism" is regarded around the world by Jews and non-Jews. For example, it is likely to affect the degree of the young generation's devotion to its Jewish identity, and at the same time is likely to affect attitudes of non-Jews toward the Diaspora Jews who live among them.  
SUGGESTED POSITIONS: **AGREE/TRUE OR DISAGREE/FALSE**
2. Diaspora Jews are members of a minority group in their home countries; in Israel, Jews are the majority. This distinction is relevant to the great importance that Diaspora Jews attach to minority rights in Israel and to human rights in general.  
SUGGESTED POSITIONS: **AGREE/TRUE OR DISAGREE/FALSE**

**TO CONSIDER:** Since democratic values are considered "Jewish values" by a large percentage of the Jewish world, "actions that erode Israel's democratic values are seen as detrimental to Judaism and to the definition of Israel as a Jewish state". Just as Italy is the nation-state of the Italian people and France is the nation-state of the French people, Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people.

Criticism heard in the Diaspora on aspects of Israel's conduct in Jewish matters is often based on arguments rooted in democratic values, just as criticism of aspects of Israel's conduct in the democratic field are often based on arguments rooted in Jewish values.

The debate over Israel's identity as a Jewish and democratic state showed that Diaspora Jews have a variety of expectations of Israel, including: (ARGUE **FOR** OR **AGAINST** EACH OF THESE STATEMENTS)

- That Israel be pluralistic;
- That Israel strive for a reality in which it does not rule over the Palestinians;
- That Israel put an end to the Orthodox monopoly over Jewish life and give equal standing to all Jewish streams;
- That Israel avoid imposing religious norms on its mostly secular civil society;
- That Israel prevent dissipation of its Jewish character by strengthening its citizens' knowledge of Jewish history, traditions, and values.

<p><i>"The 'core' characteristics shaping the minimum definition of the State of Israel as a Jewish State come from the aspects of both Zionism and heritage. At their center stands the right of every Jew to immigrate to the State of Israel, where the Jews will constitute a majority; Hebrew is the official and principal language of the State and most of its feasts and symbols reflect the national revival of the Jewish People; The heritage of the Jewish People is a central component of its religious and cultural legacy".</i></p> <p>Aharon Barak, former Supreme Court Justice</p> <p><b>DISCUSS:</b> How does this make you feel personally as a Jew?</p>	<p><i>"If there is one constant in our dynamic and ever changing world, it is that Israel is not only held to a higher standard than every other country, but that it is held to an impossible, ever-changing standard — a standard that is applied to no one else. There is a term for discriminating against the world's only Jewish state by holding it to a different standard than is applied to all other countries: it is "antisemitism." And that, is something all people (and certainly all Jews) should oppose, even those who are not supporters of the Jewish "nation-state" law."</i></p> <p>Micha Danzig</p> <p><b>Discuss:</b> Do you agree that Israel is held to a different standard or treated differently than other countries? Why or why not?</p>
<p><i>"Israel is the only Jewish State, and this law tells us what that means, just as other Basic Laws tell us what goes into its democratic foundations. Laws that protect the equal rights of Israel's citizens must be balanced with similar protections of Israel's flag and anthem and the original vision of the country as not just a refuge".</i></p> <p><b>DISCUSS:</b> How can we help people understand Israel as both a "Jewish state" that protects and celebrates Jewish identity, and a liberal democracy that protects the rights of all minorities, including non-Jews?</p>	<p><i>"The Jewish state's rebirth was the result of the Jewish people's physical and legal assertion of their national right to self-determination in their ancient homeland, and the international community's de jure recognition of that right. Being a Jewish State was, and remains, the reason for Israel's existence under international law."</i></p> <p><b>DISCUSS:</b> Is a Jewish state, just like any state in the world, not entitled to reiterate its support for settlement construction as articulated in its Declaration of Independence?</p>
<p><i>The diversity of Israeli Society has resulted in some advances to the definition of "a Jewish and Democratic State" which includes efforts to appease the interests of all parties involved: "A Torah State" (Halachic state), "National-Religious State", "National Culture State", "The State of the Jewish People", "The Jewish State", and "The Jewish State and the State of all its citizens".</i></p> <p><b>DISCUSS:</b> Does this positively or negatively affect diaspora/ international opinions of Israel? How and why?</p>	<p><i>"The nation-state law reaffirms some of the key ideas that always lay at the heart of the Zionist project, bringing about the correct balance of "Jewish" and "democratic" that has always been the secret sauce that makes Israel work."</i></p> <p>David Hazony</p> <p><b>DISCUSS:</b> If Arabs in Israel have more rights than in any Arab/ Muslim country in the world, on the basis of Jewish ethical and social practice, why do people consider a "Jewish democratic state" a contradiction in terms?</p>
<p><i>"It is the natural right of the Jewish people to live like every other nation as a free people in its own sovereign state. A state to which every Jew is entitled to ascend and in which the ingathering of the exiles is among the most basic values."</i></p> <p>Aharon Barak, former Supreme Court Justice</p> <p><b>DISCUSS:</b> Why is the nationalism of Israel as the Jewish State problematic when so many other nations have a declaration of ethnic and/or religious rulership?</p>	<p><i>"In the Land of Israel the Jewish people arose. Here its spiritual, religious and political character was forged, here it lived a life of national independence, here it created its national and universal cultural treasures and bequeathed to the entire world the eternal Book of Books."</i></p> <p><b>DISCUSS:</b> How does this make you feel as a Jew living outside the land?</p>