

FREEDOM, RIGHTS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Lesson plan for high school

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “The American Jewess on Liberation and Freedom,” which can be found at

<http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/mar06/>.

Our featured text – the editorial from the April 1897 issue of *The American Jewess* – compares the significance of Passover and the Fourth of July for American Jews. (The text can be found on the website listed above.) Most American Jews today have no problem celebrating both of these holidays – each in very different ways – and many of us do feel profoundly grateful for our freedom as Jews and as Americans. However, the comparison of these two holidays can elicit an important discussion on the underpinning assumptions about the nature of and requirements for freedom within Jewish and American law. In this session, we will look at the primary sources that emerged from the Exodus (the Ten Commandments) and the War of Independence (the Declaration of Independence) and examine how each attempts to construct a free society – and a definition of freedom.

- 1. Begin by reading the editorial** from *The American Jewess*, providing some of the background to the text from the overview essay as well. Discuss what the author meant:
 - What are the similarities between the Fourth of July and Passover?
 - Why do you think some American Jews would have advocated the celebration of American Independence Day and *not* Passover?
 - How do you understand the metaphor of the silkworm?
 - What is the Editor’s argument in favor of American Jews continuing to celebrate Passover?
 - What does it mean for liberty to “become a blessing and not a curse”? What does the Editor suggest we must do for this to happen?

2. Hand out the texts of the Ten Commandments and the excerpt from the Declaration of Independence (both can be found at the end of this lesson). (Depending on your group size, either stay in one group or break into small groups, 3 or 4 students per group.) Ask students to discuss the following questions, one at a time (don't give them the second question until they have completed the first, and so on):

- Read both of the texts. What word is used in every sentence of the Declaration of Independence text? Is this word found in the Ten Commandments?
- If the Declaration of Independence is laying out *rights* for its people, what is the Ten Commandments laying out?
- Which of these frameworks – rights or responsibilities – do you think is more fundamental to a free society? For example, compare the Sixth Commandment “You shall not murder” to the first line of the Declaration: “all men are...endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life...”

3. Discuss with your class:

- Although American law is based on certain Biblical ideas, the expression of these ideas is profoundly different. So, while both assume that our lives are a gift bestowed on us by God, American laws assert that we all have a right to live, while Jewish texts teach us that we all are obligated to protect the lives of ourselves and others.
- Ruth Messinger, President and Executive Director of the American Jewish World Service, wrote an excellent article on this topic. Read and discuss excerpt below. What role does Messinger believe Jews should be playing?

Why is it important to make this distinction [between rights and responsibilities as the basis of these texts]? Because, as these values are expressed in America and by Americans, they are rights and liberties to be enjoyed. But this will only be the case if

individuals assume responsibility for protecting these rights and enforcing the law against those who trample them.

And we live in a time when too many speak of these rights and seek to enjoy them as entitlements, but do not sufficiently recognize the responsibility to create and protect them. This is where Jews have a particular role to play.

- The conclusion of Messinger's article makes a powerful case for the connection between remembering the Exodus from Egypt and taking a role in American society to work for the greater freedom and justice of others. Read and discuss her conclusion.

Observing mitzvot – that is, acting on our obligations and responsibilities – means remembering the Exodus from Egypt, respecting the "other," and treating the stranger as we expect to be treated, with dignity and rights. It means expanding the fields of justice and peace by actively engaging with the poor and the most vulnerable in our American society and in the world. It means interpreting Jewish tradition in the framework of an interconnected world where famine, war, disease, and poverty anywhere on the globe affect us all. It means acting out of our Jewish value framework to set an example for others, acting on our responsibilities, and so enhancing the possibility that others will enjoy their rights.

And it means urging America and Americans to assume responsibility to work for these rights for more people, rather than assume that they will simply happen eventually.

Jews exercising responsibility to help heal the world understand that the maxim, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work (of perfecting the world), but neither are you free to desist from it"

(Pirket Avot 2:16), can make a difference in the world for those many people who are also made in God's image and who deserve greater justice.

The full text of Ruth Messinger's article can be found at:

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history_community/About_Jewish_History_Community/ThemesTO/AmericanFreedom/RightsResponsibilities.htm

Copyright © 2006 Jewish Women's Archive

Contact JWA at: education@jwa.org

Excerpt from the Declaration of Independence

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the consent of the governed.

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is in the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Prudence indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes; and accordingly all Experience hath shewn, that Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while Evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long Train of Abuses and Usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security.

Ten Commandments

First Commandment (Exodus 20:2): I am the Lord Your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Second Commandment (Exodus 20:3-6): You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall not make for yourself any graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of any thing that is heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them, for I, the Lord Your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.

Third Commandment (Exodus 20:7): You shall not take the name of the Lord Your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes His name in vain.

Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8-11): Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord Your God, in it you shall not do any manner of work, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your man-servant, nor your maid-servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger that is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day. Wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy.

Fifth Commandment (Exodus 20:12): Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord God gives you.

Sixth Commandment (Exodus 20:13): You shall not murder.

Seventh Commandment (Exodus 20:13): You shall not commit adultery.

Eighth Commandment (Exodus 20:13): You shall not steal.

Ninth Commandment (Exodus 20:13): You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Tenth Commandment (Exodus 20:14): You shall not covet your neighbor's house, nor his wife, his man-servant, his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is your neighbor's.