

# Parashat Lech Lecha - Civic Engagement

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו  
במצותיו, וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה.

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

## Genesis 12:1-9

(1) The LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. (2) I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. (3) I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you.” (4) Abram went forth as the LORD had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. (5) Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan, (6) Abram passed through

בראשית י"ב:א-ט'

(א) ויאמר יהוה אל-אברם לך-  
מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל-  
הארץ אשר אראך: (ב) ואעשך לגוי  
גדול ואברכך ואגדלה שמך והיה  
ברכה: (ג) ואברכה מברכך ומקללך  
אאר ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה:  
(ד) וילך אברם כאשר דבר אליו  
יהוה וילך אתו לוט ואברם בן-חמש  
שנים ושבעים שנה בצאתו מחרון:  
(ה) ויקח אברם את-שרי אשתו ואת-  
לוט בן-אחיו ואת-כל-רכושם אשר  
רכשו ואת-הנפש אשר-עשו בחרן  
ויצאו ללכת ארצה כנען ויבאו ארצה  
כנען: (ו) ויעבר אברם בארץ עד  
מקום שכם עד אלון מורה והכנעני אז  
בארץ: (ז) וירא יהוה אל-אברם  
ויאמר לזרעך אתן את-הארץ הזאת  
ויבן שם מזבח ליהוה הנראה אליו:

the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land. (7) The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "I will assign this land to your offspring." And he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. (8) From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to the LORD and invoked the LORD by name. (9) Then Abram journeyed by stages toward the Negeb.

(ח) וַיַּעֲתֶק מִשָּׁם הָהָרָה מִקְדָּם לְבֵית־  
אֵל וַיֵּט אֹהֶלָה בֵּית־אֵל מִיָּם וְהָעֵי  
מִקְדָּם וַיְכֹן־שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה וַיִּקְרָא  
בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה: (ט) וַיִּסַּע אֲבָרָם הָלוֹךְ  
וְנִסְוֹעַ הַנֶּגֶב: (פ)

## What Does it Mean to be a Citizen?

Sanhedrin 17b:10

**And it is taught in a *baraita*: A Torah scholar is not permitted to reside in any city that does not have these ten things: A court that has the authority to flog and punish transgressors; and a charity fund for which monies are collected by two people and distributed by three, as required by *halakha*. This leads to a requirement for another three people in the city. And a synagogue; and a bathhouse; and a public bathroom; a doctor; and a bloodletter; and a scribe [*velavlar*] to write sacred scrolls and necessary documents; and a**

סנהדרין י"ז ב:י'

ותניא כל עיר שאין בה עשרה דברים  
הללו אין תלמיד חכם רשאי לדור  
בתוכה בית דין מכין ועונשין וקופה  
של צדקה נגבית בשנים ומתחלקת  
בשלשה ובית הכנסת ובית המרחץ  
וביהכ"ס רופא ואומן ולבלר (וטבח)  
ומלמד תינוקות משום ר' עקיבא  
אמרו אף מיני פירא מפני שמיני  
פירא מאירין את העינים:

ritual slaughterer; and a teacher of young children. With these additional requirements there are a minimum of 120 men who must be residents of the city. **They said in the name of Rabbi Akiva:** The city must **also** have **varieties of fruit, because varieties of fruit illuminate the eyes.**

## Is Democracy a Jewish Value?

### Bava Batra 8a:15

It was taught: [One must dwell in a place] thirty days [before giving] to the soup kitchen, three months for the charity fund, six months for clothing, nine months for burial, twelve months for paying taxes. [Translation by Uri L'Tzedek. Edited for gender neutrality]

בבא בתרא ח' א:ט"ו

והתניא: שלשים יום - לתמחוי,  
שלשה חדשים - לקופה, ששה -  
לכסות, תשעה - לקבורה, שנים עשר  
- לפסי העיר

### Deuteronomy 16:18-20

(18) You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes, in all the settlements that the Eternal your God is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice. (19) You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just. (20) Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and inherit the

דברים ט"ז:י"ח-כ'

(יח) שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתֶּן-לָךְ בְּכָל-  
שְׁעָרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ  
לְשִׁבְטֶיךָ וְשָׁפְטוּ אֶת-הָעָם מִשְׁפָּט-  
צֶדֶק: (יט) לֹא-תִטֶּה מִשְׁפָּט לֹא תִכִּיר  
פָּנִים וְלֹא-תִקַּח שֹׂחַד כִּי הַשֹּׂחַד יַעְוֹר  
עֵינֶיךָ חֻכְמִים וִיסֵלֶךְ דְּבָרֶי צְדִיקִים: (כ)  
צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדֹּף לִמְעַן תַּחֲיֶה וִירָשֶׁת  
אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ:  
(ס)

land that the Eternal your God is giving you.

**Berakhot 55a:11**

With regard to Bezalel's appointment, **Rabbi Yitzhak said: One may only appoint a leader over a community if he consults with the community** and they agree to the appointment, **as it is stated:** "And Moses said unto the children of Israel: **See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel**, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah" (Exodus 35:30). **The Lord said to Moses: Moses, is Bezalel a suitable appointment in your eyes? Moses said to Him: Master of the universe, if he is a suitable appointment in Your eyes, then all the more so in my eyes.** The Holy One, Blessed be He, **said to him: Nevertheless, go and tell Israel and ask their opinion. Moses went and said to Israel: Is Bezalel suitable in your eyes? They said to him: If he is suitable in the eyes of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and in your eyes, all the more so he is suitable in our eyes.**

**ברכות נ"ה א:י"א**

אמר רבי יצחק אין מעמידין פרנס על הצבור אלא אם כן נמלכים בצבור שנאמר ראו קרא ה' בשם בצלאל אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה משה הגון עליך בצלאל אמר לו רבוננו של עולם אם לפניך הגון לפני לא כל שכן אמר לו אף על פי כן לך אמור להם הלך ואמר להם לישראל הגון עליכם בצלאל אמרו לו אם לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ולפניך הוא הגון לפנינו לא כל שכן

**Shulchan Arukh, Choshen Mishpat**

**163:1**

For any community matter on which they cannot find common ground, they should convene all taxpayers, and they should agree that each will voice his view altruistically, and they will follow the majority

חושן משפט קס"ג:א'

כל צרכי ציבור שאינן יכולין להשוות עצמן יש להושיב כל בע"ב הנותנים מס ויקבלו עליהם שכל אחד יאמר דעתו לשם שמים וילכו אחר הרוב

**Shabbat 54b:20**

Everyone who can protest the sin of their household and does not is responsible for the people of their household. For the people of their city is responsible for the people of their city. For the whole world, they is responsible for the whole world....

שבת נ"ד ב:כ'

כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו ולא מיחה נתפס על אנשי ביתו באנשי עירו נתפס על אנשי עירו בכל העולם כולו נתפס על כל העולם כולו

**What About Secular Government?**

**Jeremiah 29:4-7**

(4) Thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community which I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: (5) Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. (6) Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and

ירמיהו כ"ט:ד'-ז'

(ד) כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכָל־הַגּוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר־הִגַּלְתִּי מִירוּשָׁלַם בָּבֶלָה: (ה) בָּנוּ בָתִּים וְשָׁבוּ וְנִטְעוּ גִּזְזִים וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־פְּרִיָּהֶן: (ו) קַחוּ נָשִׁים וְהוֹלִידוּ בָנִים וּבָנוֹת וְקַחוּ לְבָנֵיכֶם נָשִׁים וְאֶת־בָּנוֹתֵיכֶם תִּתְּנוּ לְאִנּוּשִׁים וְתִלְדְּנָה בָנִים וּבָנוֹת וְרַבּוּ־נַשִּׁם וְאֶל־תִּמְעָטוּ: (ז) וְדַרְשׁוּ אֶת־

daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. (7) And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the LORD in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה  
וְהִתְפַּלְּלוּ בַעֲדָהּ אֶל־יְהוָה כִּי בְשָׁלוֹמָהּ  
יְהִי לָכֶם שְׁלוֹם: (פ)

**Avodah Zarah 4a:3**

**עבודה זרה ד' א:ג'**

**Alternatively, just as in the case of fish of the sea, any fish that is bigger than another swallows the other, so too in the case of people, were it not for the fear of the ruling government, anyone who is bigger than another would swallow the other. And this is as we learned in a mishna (Avot 3:2) that Rabbi Ḥanina, the deputy High Priest, says: One should pray for the continued welfare of the government, as were it not for the fear of the government, every man would swallow his neighbor alive.**

דבר אחר מה דגים שבים כל הגדול  
מחבירו בולע את חבירו אף בני אדם  
אלמלא מוראה של מלכות כל הגדול  
מחבירו בולע את חבירו והיינו דתנן  
רבי חנינא סגן הכהנים אומר הוי  
מתפלל בשלומה של מלכות שאלמלא  
מוראה של מלכות איש את רעהו  
חיים בלעו

**Rabbi Avraham Kook (former Chief Rabbi of Israel),  
*Mishpat Kohen*, Responsum 144.**

When there is no Jewish king, his rights in governing and protecting the welfare of the Jewish people revert back to the entire nation. Since their wellbeing and prosperity must be protected, many of the royal rights and responsibilities can be assigned to the leaders of the Jewish people.

## Are Jews Required to Vote?

### Exodus 23:2

You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong—you shall not give perverse testimony in a dispute so as to pervert it in favor of the mighty—

שמות כ"ג:ב'

לֹא-תִהְיֶה אַחֲרֵי-רָבִים לְרָעַת וְלֹא-  
תַעֲנֶה עַל-רֹב לְנֹטֹת אַחֲרֵי רָבִים  
לְהָטֹת:

### Rashbam on Exodus 23:2:1

(2) if, in your opinion, the majority are about to commit an error in judgment, do not remain silent because they are the majority, but state your view. This applies even if you know beforehand that they will not accept your viewpoint but that of the majority.

רשב"ם על שמות כ"ג:ב':א'

(ב) לא תהיה אחרי רבים לרעות -  
אם הם דנים שלא כדין לפי דעתך  
ואף על פי שלא יאמינו לך כי אם  
למרובים.

### Midrash Tanchuma, Mishpatim 2:1

If a person of learning participates in public affairs and serves as judge or arbiter, that person gives stability to the land... But if a person sits in their home and says to themselves, "What have the affairs of society to do with me?... Why should I trouble myself with the people's voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace!"—if one does this, they overthrow the world.  
[translation by Hazon]

מִלְכָּה שֶׁל תּוֹרָה, בְּמִשְׁפָּט נִשְׁהוּא  
עוֹשֶׂה, מַעֲמִיד אֶת הָאָרֶץ... אִם מִשִּׁים  
אָדָם עֲצָמוֹ בְּתִרוּמָה הַזֹּאת שְׂמוֹשְׁלֵכֶת  
בְּזוּיוֹת הַבַּיִת וְאוֹמֵר: מָה לִּי בְּטוֹרַח  
הַצָּבוּר? מָה לִּי בְּדִינֵיהֶם? מָה לִּי  
לְשִׁמוּעַ קוֹלָם? שְׁלוֹם עָלֶיךָ נִפְשִׁי!  
הֲרִי זֶה מִחְרִיב אֶת הָעוֹלָם.

### **Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (Letter, dated 1984)**

“On reaching the shores of the United States, Jews found a safe haven. The rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights have allowed us the freedom to practice our religion without interference and to live in this republic in safety.

A fundamental principle of Judaism is *hakaras hatov* — recognizing benefits afforded us and giving expression to our appreciation. Therefore, it is incumbent on each Jewish citizen to participate in the democratic system which guards the freedoms we enjoy. The most fundamental responsibility incumbent on each individual is to register and to vote.

Therefore, I urge all members of the Jewish community to fulfill their obligations by registering as soon as possible, and by voting. By this, we can express our appreciation and contribute to the continued security of our community.”

### **Modern rabbis answer the question: "Are Jews Commanded to Vote?"**

From Moment Magazine:

[https://www.momentmag.com/ask\\_the\\_rabbis\\_voting/](https://www.momentmag.com/ask_the_rabbis_voting/)

### **Rabbi David Evan Markus (Renewal)**

Every Jew has a duty to vote in the democratic elections in one's nation of citizenship. Jewish law mandates the creation of civil government (*Avot* 3:2, *Avodah Zara* 4a) and obliges all who benefit from public services to help provide them (*Bava Batra* 7b, *Bava Metzia* 108a). Voting follows from this Jewish communitarian value against free-riding and from a “social compact”—recognized by Jews 700 years before Enlightenment democratic thought arose in Europe—by which Jews opting to live in a society thereby agree to support its government and laws (*Rashbam*, *Bava Batra* 54b). Most of all, Judaism views voting to be a holy act of divine partnership. Before



selecting Bezalel as the Mishkan's master builder, God told Moses to consult the people (*Berakhot* 55a): the modern elective franchise continues this legacy "for the sake of heaven" (*Shulchan Aruch*, C.M. 163:1). It follows that all government policies—from public order and foreign policy to education and the environment—are issues on which Jews are called to help renew and repair the world in holy partnership at the ballot box.

***Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb (Reconstructionist)***

We may not be commanded, exactly, but we're fools, hypocrites and worse if we fail to vote. Judaism puts values front and center, and in a democracy, voting is the core expression of values. Think we should "pursue justice" (Deuteronomy 16)? Vote. "Love the stranger/immigrant" (Deuteronomy 10)? Vote. Keep humans and Earth, *adam* and *adamah*, connected (Genesis 2)? Vote. Love our own, protect others (Leviticus 19) and honor all who are created in the Divine image (Genesis 1)? Vote.

***Rabbi Laura Novak Winer (Reform)***

A man once came before the Chazon Ish (a Russian-born Orthodox rabbi, 1878-1953) and explained that he didn't have enough money to pay his taxes and, therefore, would not be allowed to vote in an upcoming election. The Chazon Ish responded: "You should sell your tefillin and pay the taxes... tefillin, you can borrow from another, but the right to vote you cannot get from someone else."

As this story illustrates, there have been times when Jews faced barriers to voting, or, though allowed to vote in theory, were unable to do so. (Of course, there were far worse times when legislation affirmatively stripped Jews of their rights, such as the Nuremberg Laws in 1930s Germany.) Thankfully, in the United States, the 24th Amendment protects one's right to vote regardless of taxpayer status.

The Chazon Ish story tells us that voting is so important that one should sell one's tefillin—a symbol of one's commitment to observing the mitzvot, or commandments—in order to do so. I would suggest that for us, today, voting

is more than a right or a privilege. It is an obligation incumbent upon us as equal citizens in a democratic society.

***Rabbi Dov Wagner (Chabad)***

There are many sources in Torah that talk about the imperative for civic engagement: the obligation for a system of justice in the Noahide Code, the very Noahide Code itself, the imperative to “pray for the welfare of the government” and many more. But saying that we are commanded to vote would be focusing on the symptom rather than the cause.

We are commanded to do what we can to “correct the world under the sovereignty of G-d”—to make our world better and more in tune with its innate goodness and sanctity. To the extent that this can be achieved at the ballot box, voting can be seen as an expression of our core Jewish values. But remembering to focus on the underlying imperative and aim can help to ensure that we maintain the right attitude toward it—an attitude within which political engagement is all about upholding our highest aspirations of ethics and love of a fellow, even those with whom we might happen to disagree.

Another reminder provided by voting: We each count. Every one. And each person counts for no more—and no less—than one. Although that may be arguable at times in the vagaries of our political structures, it never varies where it truly matters—in our absolute and essential value in the eyes of G-d.

***Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein (Orthodox)***

The use of the word “commanded” makes this question easier. There are a lot of warm, fuzzy reasons to vote, but as a halachist, I am limited to citing two compelling reasons why one is actually obligated to do so.

The first is an overarching principle of Jewish life that translates again and again into normative behavior: *Hakarat ha-tov*, recognizing the good that someone or something has provided you. This is a great country for Jews. It is a minimal expectation of citizenship that we participate in the electoral process, and I see it as nothing less than obligatory to show our appreciation of this great country by acting on that expectation.

The second reason may be more controversial. In 1984, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the preeminent halachist of the late 20th century, wrote in a letter that all observant Jewish citizens of this country are obligated to vote. He wrote this during an election season in which many people felt the outcome was a foregone conclusion and any individual vote would have no value. Nonetheless, Rabbi Feinstein wrote—at the urging of some people in the know—that there are always people scrutinizing the voting habits of different communities, and that Jews have an obligation to vote in such a way that they will do the most good for their community. And he called it an exercise in “*nosei b’ol ha-tzibbur*”—the rabbis command one not only not to shirk community responsibility, but to seek out ways in which one may help ease the community’s burdens. So, he argued, where there are consequences for the community—consequences that he did not spell out—all Jews should vote.