



CONGREGATION
SHOMREI TORAH
שומרי תורה

Religious Action Center
of Reform Judaism



L'Taken 2016

Rabbi Stephanie Kramer
Malcolm McElheney
Noah Bacon
Rose Cohen-Sandler
Spencer Gibson
Claire Jacobs
Cole Levy
Olivia McGahan
Ariel Merhav
Marcus Navarra
Celia Rose
Shane Rosenthal
Caleb Weil



Lobbying Speeches

Shomrei Torah teens gained the knowledge and tools to write an effective, persuasive and passionate speech to present to our state Senators and Representatives.

Baruch Atah, Adonai, Eloheinu, Melech haolam, shenatan lanu hizdamnut l'takein et haolam.
Praised are You, Adonai, our God, ruler of the universe, who has given us the opportunity to change the world.

On a chilly, very early morning, eleven Shomrei Torah teens boarded a plane for Washington, D.C. By the time they returned they all would have done something incredible.

These teens were participants in the long-running L'Taken Social Justice seminar. This intensive weekend is run by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the social advocacy branch of the Reform Movement. During this weekend, our teens joined hundreds of their peers from across the country to celebrate Shabbat and learn how to be an advocate for social change.

Through various simulations and programs, they studied what makes advocacy inherently Jewish as well as delved into several national and global issues. The entire weekend culminated with each of the students having the opportunity to lobby to our elected officials on Capitol Hill.

Our students spoke on topics they were passionate about -- LGBT equality, raising minimum wage, climate change, stem cell research, voting rights, and supporting the State of Israel. With the support of the RAC staff, our students lobbied on these topics in the offices of our State Senators, Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein. As well as the House Representatives from their home districts, Jared Huffman and Mike Thompson.

These teens, very few of whom had done intensive learning of this caliber before, showed their passion for justice and their willingness to try new things. They branched out, made friends from other congregations and other states and showed their courage to our national leaders. *Mazel tov* to our amazing teen advocates!

—Malcolm McElheney, Youth and Music Coordinator

Poverty

Marcus Navarra

Today, if you are a single parent of a single child and you have a minimum wage job, you are living below the poverty line. With just \$15,080 a year in spending money, you may not have enough to feed yourself and your family after paying for rent, utilities, and potential medical expenses.

The Talmud states "One who withholds an employee's wages is as though he deprived him of his life." When we pay some of the hardest working Americans an amount that is completely disproportionate to the amount of work that they do, we are limiting their opportunities.

These people aren't just teenagers or college students getting summer jobs. The average age of all minimum wage workers is 35. There is a large and diverse group of people that this legislation would benefit. In fact, nearly two-thirds of all minimum wage workers are women, so the passage of this bill would narrow the income gap between the genders.

One of the main concerns about this bill is that it might affect small business owners and force them to go out of business or lay off workers. This is a misconception because many small business owners already pay their employees above the minimum wage and two-thirds of them are in favor of a minimum wage increase.

In reality, it would benefit these business owners because raising the minimum wage to \$12 an hour, as is proposed, would increase a worker's yearly income to \$24,960 which would increase consumer spending which is a direct benefit to small business owners.

Another part of the proposed bill would index the minimum wage to cost of living and inflation every year. This is essential, because inflation and rising prices have already caused our minimum wage to lose thirty percent of its value over the last 30 years. Indexing the minimum wage is already policy in 15 states as well as D.C.

In a few years, I will graduate from high school and I will have to fend for myself economically. Whether or not I can support myself will be largely linked to the minimum wage. I want to be able to save for retirement, buy a house, and support a family, but I will never be able to do any of these if I have to get a job that pays \$7.25 an hour.

My future, and the future of an entire generation is in your hands, and I am thankful that you want to support a brighter future for all of the United States. The Torah says, "Speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy" in Proverbs 31:9. This compels me to advocate this bill. I strongly urge you as our representative to continue supporting "The Raise the Wage Act" and to vote to make it a law.

Lobbying a member of Congress is a unique experience that very few Americans take advantage of and one that can have a significant impact on the course of legislation.



Climate Change

Ariel Merhav & Olivia McGahan

As we move further into the 21st century, we find there to be many issues facing our world, one of the most prominent being climate change. If we were to take a trip to the polar regions of the world, we would notice something very disturbing. We would notice a lack of ice. Pictures from 50 years ago show vast ice fields stretching as far as the eye could see. When comparing these pictures to pictures of today, we notice that the ice has shrunk by as much as two-thirds in some areas. This lack of ice means more water in the ocean which causes the ocean to rise.

How does this affect the U.S? If we were to look at a map of Florida, we would notice that much of the land is at or below sea level. Therefore, it won't take long for much of its land to be submerged. Florida isn't the only state endangered. Low-lying levels of California, Oregon and Washington as well as the entire East Coast are in danger. We consider this to be extremely alarming considering that these areas hold most of the United State's population.

Climate change is also a global issue and it is important for us to be aware of our impact as Americans on the rest of the world. Although America has only 5% of the population, we use 20% of the world's oil and we create 19% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change claims around 400,000 lives per year and 83% of those are in developing countries. Therefore, it is our responsibility to help those countries prepare and survive this global problem that cannot be ignored. We ask you to continue your support of the Green Climate Fund and encourage your colleagues to as well.

The Green Climate Fund is extremely valuable from a Jewish standpoint. When G-d created the first human beings, G-d led them around the Garden of Eden and said, "look at my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. Take care not to spoil or destroy my world, for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you." (Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13) There are also many points in the Torah and Talmudic concepts that remind us of G-d's ownership of the land, reminding us that it is not ours to damage or destroy. An example of this is found in Leviticus 25:23 - "The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is mine; you are strangers and sojourners with me." These texts demonstrate why it is important for us as Jews to act against climate change, starting with the Green Climate Fund.

We are passionate about supporting the Green Climate Fund and believe it to be important because climate change is a huge issue in our lives, especially in our futures. "I am the head of the Climate Change Committee at my school in Arcata California. Together we have worked with local environmental planner Aulderon Laird. He, along with the City of Arcata, has determined that at the current rate of climate change, the water line of Arcata will raise 16 inches by 2050 and 100 inches by 2100." – Olivia McGahan

Our community has already begun to feel the effects of climate change in other ways as well. In the past few months, we have experienced power outages from El Nino and sink holes in the middle of our roads. We went from drought warnings to flash flood warnings in a matter of months. The part that worries us the most is, no matter how much we prepare ourselves, it won't make enough of a difference on a global scale. As much as we prepare ourselves and are aware of this problem, there are hundreds of other communities - not just in the U.S., but in the developing world - that are not prepared and do not have the means to become prepared for the effects of climate change.

None of this would be possible if it weren't for the actions of the government and organizations to mitigate the causes of global warming. I would like to thank senator Feinstein for supporting the Green Climate Fund and ask that she continue her support. We urge her colleagues to do the same during the upcoming budget process.

Together we are making a step toward a healthier world. We need your help to convince fellow senators to support the Green Climate Fund and understand that the power is in their hands to create a cleaner world. By supporting this funding, you have allowed me to continue my love for the ocean and ensured that the future generations in America and throughout the world will be able to witness this beautiful and mystical space we call the sea.

Stem Cell Research

Spencer Gibson & Celia Rose

As you likely know, stem cells can potentially develop into any type of cells including tissue or organs. Scientists are currently working on manipulating these for various medicinal purposes. Out of all types of stem cells, embryonic stem cells are the easiest to work with and obtain. The only embryonic stem cells used by scientists are leftovers from private in-vitro clinics that would otherwise be discarded.

This issue is important to America because we have a growing population of people suffering from Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, Arthritis, Diabetes, and Cancer. All of these could be solved or treated with stem cells, or information that would be learned from studying stem cells further. Millions of people could be impacted, including 29.1 million children and adults in the United States with diabetes and 106 million people worldwide projected to have Alzheimer's disease by 2050.

Currently, stem cell research is being funded by the US government, but only by executive order, which could be repealed by a future president. With the possibility that it could be repealed in less than a year, we think that it is important to introduce an act that would cement funding for this research. We believe that the Federal government, as well as state governments, should fund scientific and medical advancements and, whenever possible, not be barred by irrational religious fears or phobias. 64% of Americans support stem cell research according to a May 2015 Gallup poll, and the RAC is among them.

As Jews, this is extremely important to us. The Talmud Sanhedrin states, "One who saves a life, it is accounted as if a world is saved". Another Jewish text, Maimonides' Commentary on Mishnah Pesachim claims "God created food and water; we must use them in staving off hunger and thirst. God created drugs and compounds and gave us the intelligence necessary to discover their medicinal properties; we must use them in warding off illness and disease".

This contributes to our belief that we should use this perfect source of stem cells for medicinal and scientific research to help heal those in our society who need it most. Along with these, the Talmud Mishnah tells us that, "Prior to forty days of gestation, the fetus is *mayim b'alma*, or mere water". Therefore, by our religious belief, absolutely no humans are harmed by the harvesting of embryonic stem cells, as five days is obviously within forty days of gestation.

"Personally, I am extremely passionate about this issue, as cancer and other similar illnesses run in my family. Several years ago, my Grandpa Larry died from cancer, and last winter, my Grandpa Bill also died from cancer. I very much hope that stem cells could lead to a more effective and less painful way of treating cancer, as I saw firsthand how painful the current methods are." – Spencer Gibson

"Several years ago, my uncle benefitted from stem cell research to help treat his severe knee problems. I am also interested in biology and am considering pursuing genetics or cellular biology as a career." – Celia Rose

Therefore, we believe that it would be a tragic loss to not take advantage of this incredible scientific opportunity to expand the knowledge of the world and apply it to those who need it. If ever given the chance, we would be honored to one day work with the very same cells we are advocating the research of today. In our opinion, genetic research and the stem cells could revolutionize health care and help the longevity of people around the world.

Once again, we would like to thank you for listening. We would like to ask you to do your best to make sure that this vital research continues by co-sponsoring legislation similar to the Stem Cell Research Advancement Act. This bill, last introduced in the 113th congress, would allow the federal government to fund embryonic stem cell research as long as the research meets strict ethical requirements.



From left: Malcolm McElheney, Caleb Weil, Shane Rosenthal, Cole Levy, Rose Cohen-Sandler, Spencer Gibson, Olivia McGahan, Rabbi Kramer, Ariel Merhav, Marcus Navarra, Claire Jacobs, Celia Rose, Noah Bacon – National Holocaust Memorial and Museum.



Bernard & Audre Rapoport
L'Taken
 Social Justice Seminars



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From left: Ariel Merhav, Shane Rosenthal, Cole Levy, Claire Jacobs, Olivia McGahan, Spencer Gibson. Lobbying for California Congressional District #2 - Representative Jared Huffman.



From left: Marcus Navarra, Caleb Weil, Rose Cohen-Sandler, Noah Bacon, Celia Rose. Lobbying for California Congressional District #5 – Representative Mike Thompson.

Beyond Marriage Equality: The Full Rainbow of LGBT Rights

Claire Jacobs & Lauren Greenbaum (Temple Beth Ohr in La Mirada, California)

As Jews, we are intimately acquainted with the effect of bigotry. Since the beginning, Jews have been targeted. Stories, such as the Passover story of Moses, The Crusades, and World War II, have taught us about living in fear of xenophobic violence. Our ancestors have taught us the effects of living as second-class citizens, and discrimination against any individual threatens the safety of an entire community.

Judaism has taught us that all human beings are created *B'tzelem Elohim*— in the divine image. Rabbi David Saperstein, former director of the Religious Action Center said, “We oppose discrimination against individuals, including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender men and women, for the stamp of the divine is imprinted on the souls of each and every one of us.” In Exodus 23:9 it states, “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the strangers, having yourself been strangers in the land of Egypt.” The Union for Reform Judaism has long supported equal rights for all people from the abolition movement and suffrage movement, to the civil rights movement, to the LGBT movement. Women and minorities have worked tirelessly to achieve equal rights, as promised by The United States of America.

As American youth, this issue is very important to us. As said in our very own Declaration of Independence, “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” However, LGBT people are most certainly NOT treated equally in this country. Currently, 18 states and the District of Columbia prohibit housing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. However, we are making progress. In June 2015, the Supreme Court made same-sex marriage a nationwide right through their decision on *Obergefell vs. Hodges*. This was a huge victory for the LGBT community, and the Reform movement applauded the decision. Yet for LGBT people, our society is only a little more just and there is still much work to be done before equality is truly achieved.

Though America has civil right laws in place, two out of three LGBT Americans report having experienced discrimination. The Equality Act can help change this. Though we may never be able to fully eliminate discrimination, we can do everything in our power to make it as minute as possible in our country. By building upon decades of civil rights legislation that have tangibly reduced discrimination, the Equality Act will significantly reduce the amount of discrimination LGBT people face and will provide an avenue for recourse for victims of discrimination.

This bill will provide the same protections to LGBT people that are provided to other protected classes under federal law. And, the Equality Act will strengthen existing civil rights laws by extending the definition of public accommodations and will further ensure that people are protected from sex discrimination in public accommodations and federal funding.

I have been involved in my school's Queer-Straight-Alliance (QSA) since my freshman year. This year, I became co-leader. The first meeting was greeted with many familiar faces, many of whom identify within the LGBT umbrella. However, there was one freshman who stood out. She looked uncomfortable and shy, bangs covering her face and her oversized hoodie making her appear even smaller than she was. I introduced myself and asked her what had drawn her to the QSA club. Obviously very nervous, she explained that she came from a very conservative family. She didn't know exactly what was “wrong” but she knew she did not feel like other girls.

Inspired by this conversation, I decided to start the year off with a discussion of LGBT identities. I explained different sexualities: gay, lesbian, bisexual, demisexual, asexual, etc. My new friend listened intently, but still had a lost look on her face. I then switched to gender identity. “When a person is transgender, they identify as a member of the opposite sex than what they were born.” Suddenly, my friend's face shifted. Her eyes widened and she smiled. She came to the realization that she identified as a “he”. He was transgender.

The QSA club and my friend worked with the school and his parents to understand what he was going through. Luckily, everybody was supportive. The school changed some of the bathrooms to “gender neutral” and changed all his records to “male”. I am so proud of my friend, and am thrilled that we live in such a supportive community. However, I worry that when he grows up and gets to college and the real working world, he will encounter problems with jobs, housing, and general public discrimination. With the passing of the Equality Act, I can be confident that my friend will be safe with his identity.

I thank you for supporting this bill, and for being an original cosponsor of it as well. We strongly urge you to continue your support for it, as well as urge you to show even more support for any similar bills that come through congress.

Israel

Shane Rosenthal & Cole Levy

Israel became a Jewish, independent state in 1948. Tensions from their neighbors, who did not favor the young nation, increased gradually until May of 1967 when Israel's bordering countries began conducting military exercises along Israel's border.

This, and other factors, led to the Israeli Defense Force launching a series of offensives when threatened. During the whole process, Israel expanded its borders exponentially, gaining land such as the holy city of Jerusalem and the Gaza strip. Since then, Israel has been struggling with the problem of handling her borders.

As we're sure you are aware, this conflict between Israel and its neighbors has been ongoing for decades. Just as everyone else, we seek a solution to this long-standing issue. One description we found, given by former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, exemplifies both our views and those of the Reform movement. He said, "In my vision of peace, in this small land of ours, two peoples live freely, side-by-side, in amity and mutual respect. Each will have its own flag, its own national anthem, its own government. Neither will threaten the security or survival of the other." The reform movement supports such an idea- one of an Israel sanctioned into two states- one for Israel and one for Palestine. This, in conjunction with stable treaties with the surrounding lands, is the solution to Israel's most notorious dispute.

In order to achieve a state of such peace, however, a vast amount of new legislation will be necessary. That's where Representative Huffman comes in. Through supporting proposed legislation which would aid in negotiations between Israel and its neighbors, and the continued support of foreign aid funding and the Memorandum of Understanding, the U.S. can help Israel and its middle-eastern neighbors overcome their differences.

"A few years ago I was out with my dad at Thumb's Up Burger in Windsor, California. As we were waiting for our food to be made, I remember noticing a newspaper on the table. The front page article had something to do with Israel. Being a Jew, I decided to pick up the article and read it. It outlined Israel's destruction of tunnels discovered in a now Hamas-controlled Gaza strip which lead into Israel illegally. The article spoke of the backlash that Israel received for their defensive action. Before making any assumptions of my own, I read up on why this conflict exists.

After doing my research, I felt that I could make proper assumptions about Israel's status. I did not see an evil, tyrannical government with a vendetta to hurt the people around them, as some do. I saw a government that has had to make some difficult decisions, many of which on their own, and is still struggling with discovering peace in their conflicted situation today." – Shane Rosenthal

It is not easy to please a large amount of people who have various values and incentives. As Americans, we should understand this. However, as Americans, we find ways to solve problems, and the U.S. perseveres time and time again. Israel has tried to, but has not found solutions to her problems, and the longer we wait for a solution, the more the situation may escalate. To help them would not only be the moral thing to do, but the democratic and American thing to do. When we see problems, we find solutions. Here, there is a problem - we should find a solution.

The U.S. has a lot to gain from helping Israel. We gain a strong foothold in the Middle East which we can use to help stabilize the entire region. Strategically, they are in the middle of the Middle East, which is a great place to use as a strong region in the overall conflicted areas. We help an ally of the U.S. and, the more friends we maintain and make, the better. It is immoral to turn our backs on an ally that needs assistance in stabilizing their region.

By supporting legislation which would involve the U.S. in Israeli peace negotiations and continue funding to the nation, we take steps towards tranquility. Israel welcomes our assistance, and we ought to send it in the interest of a more peaceful earth.

Voting Rights

Rose Cohen-Sandler & Caleb Weil

The right to vote is fundamental to our democracy and is one of the most basic civil rights. Of the variety of political issues that our nation faces, they are all very closely connected with the right to vote. When we are of age, we will vote for our state's elected officials, who will represent our community and the people we live with by creating legislation that will affect the entire country. However, we believe the right to vote is meaningless and insignificant if the mechanisms used to execute the right to vote are inefficient or unfair.

Recently, there have been concerns regarding vote counting, election rules and other issues that threaten the legitimacy of the electoral process. We think it is essential to our democracy that all Americans have an equal opportunity to vote, in order to ensure that all opinions and perspectives are expressed in the legislation of our nation. Over the course of our history, the right to vote has expanded from white, property-owning males, to include Non-Christians, non-property owners, African Americans, Women, Native Americans and adults over 18. In addition, other restrictions on voting, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, have been outlawed as well.

However, new voting restrictions, including complex identification requirements, and shorter voting periods, can make it extremely difficult for citizens to access their right to vote. Such restrictions especially target low-income, African Americans, and the elderly and students, thus altering the legitimacy of the voting process because not all perspectives have equal opportunity to be fairly expressed. In addition, the Supreme Court struck down "preclearance" in Section 4(b), part of the Voting Rights Acts in *Shelby vs. Holder*, thus eliminating the formula that would require states with a history of discrimination to approve planned changes to the voting system with the Department of Justice ahead of time. Without preclearance, many states and areas have begun to introduce new voting restrictions, threatening the right to vote.

For the last few years, this broken electoral system seemed distant. But, having just turned 18, the issue just became very real. As youth in America, we want to have a say in our future, and a say in the future of this country. With the upcoming presidential election, this is something constantly on our minds, and on the minds of many of our peers who will be able to vote for the first time this November. The votes of young people are, in our opinion, the most important votes. We say this because the decisions made in this election will affect us for years and years to come. And for the most part, these decisions that affect us are not made by us.

In recent elections, the amount of youths voting has been disturbingly low. This low turnout is caused in part by the absence of voting rights that should be covered by the VRAA, making it harder or extremely inconvenient for youths and students to vote. I live a pretty privileged existence. One year, as a child interested in the electoral process, I watched my father cast his vote. I remember being struck by the fast lines and hassle free voting at the church of our white, upper middle class neighborhood. I know I probably won't be blessed with this breezy system when it's my turn to vote in college, and I know it is much, much harder in other communities, and will continue to be this way if the Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2015 is not passed.

This issue is important to us and our community because, as Reform Jews, we believe that full participation in the electing of our leaders is extremely important. Hearing and counting voices from a diverse and uninhibited background to create a fair vote has been important to the Jewish people for centuries.

Pirkei Avot states, "*Al tif-ros mir ha-tzi-bur*," "Do not separate yourself from the community." In the current state of affairs, it is hard for certain parts of some communities to vote, effectively separating those parts from the whole. It is unjust to separate oneself from the community, but it is more unjust to forcibly separate others. As Jews, it is our job to make sure that all parts of our community are included in the electoral process whether our views align or not.

We would like to thank Representative Thompson for his continued support of The Voting Rights Advancement Act (H.R. 2867) as a cosponsor. The VRAA would promote transparency in disclosures from states and jurisdictions about changes to their voting practices, thus offering more protections for venerable communities, racial and ethnic minorities and language minority groups.



L'TAKEN 2016

“Shomrei Torah teens were able to take in the cultural side of DC. They visited the Lincoln memorial, spent an evening in Georgetown, and hopped around the National Mall visiting the various Smithsonian museums.

They had the chance to tour United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum, and then celebrated *havdallah* on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial.

Rabbi Stephanie Kramer commented on the poignancy of the pairing of these two experiences. She said how incredible it is to be so publicly Jewish in our nation’s capital after being reminded of the atrocities of the *Shoah*.”

Malcolm McElheney
Youth & Music Coordinator



Are you ready to change the World?

Every year, thousands of high school-aged students participate in the Religious Action Center's *L'Taken* Seminar in Washington, D.C.

The Religious Action Center is the legislative office of the Union for Reform Judaism whose 900 congregations across North America encompass 1.5 million Reform Jews and over 2000 Reform rabbis.

The program is designed to expose students to a variety of public policy issues, explore the Jewish values surrounding these issues, and teach the skills of an effective advocate.

Students also take advantage of the vast opportunities available in our nation's capital by visiting the National Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Smithsonian National Mall and celebrating *Havdallah* at the Jefferson Memorial.

All the while, students will have the chance to meet and mingle with hundreds of Reform Jews from across the United States, all of whom are in D.C. for the same reason—to pursue *tikkun olam*.



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