Every year, over 2,000 high school-aged students participate in the Religious Action Center's L'Taken Seminar in Washington, D.C. In February 2017, 20 of those teens were from Congregation Shomrei Torah.
Changing the World…

L'Taken is designed to expose students to a variety of public policy issues, show them how to explore the Jewish values surrounding these issues, and teach the skills of an effective advocate.

Throughout the weekend, students were given the knowledge and tools to write an effective, persuasive and passionate speech on a topic of their choice. Speeches were presented when visiting the offices of our senators and representatives during the trip.

Students also took 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 had the chance to meet and mingle with hundreds of Reform Jews from across the United States, all of whom were in D.C. for the same reason—to pursue Tikkun Olam.

From Left to Right: Adam Harris-Bloom, Alana Cree, Bella Nadler, Jacob Banks, Mia Zechowy, Nadav Wichmann, Shyala Rose-Brown, Daniel Neustadt, Jackson Nadler-Block, Celia Rose, Eden Luvisht, Natalie Lasker, Alana Macken, Bella Clark, Cyrus Siegel, Nate Rowand, Lucas Navarro, James Post, Avery Cruz, Olivia McGahan.
Climate Change
Danielle Neustadt, Shayla Rose-Brown, Alana Macken, Olivia McGahan

The effects of climate change are becoming more prevalent every day. Over time, fossil fuels have become more convenient in our daily lives, but we need to be aware of the effects that they can have. The use of fossil fuels is not only threatening our environment, but also the future of many people as well. While it is easy to dismiss the effects of climate change, it is important to consider the ramifications that it can have on our future generations.

One generation passes away, and another generation is born. We must consider the health and well-being of the next generation when making decisions today. We need to ensure that they have a better future, and that we are not leaving them in a world that is worse off than the one we know.

The issue of climate change is incredibly important to our country. The US only contains 5% of the world’s population, yet we have contributed 19% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions. We aren’t just responsible for our own country, we are responsible for the effect on the entire world. Statistics show that climate change is expected to cause up to 250,000 additional deaths per year from 2030-2050 mainly due to natural disasters, poor air quality and diseases that could spread due to the extreme incline in heat levels throughout the world.

Climate change disproportionately affects poor communities and communities of color in the US who do not have a voice in these times. These communities, the environment and the next generation are those most affected by the decisions we make. Global heat levels have steadily been increasing since the industrial revolution and will continue to do so unless our country takes action. We must find a way to lessen the negative changes that we have already made to the environment, while finding a way to prevent these issues from increasing. The US has been a leader in new technology and advances for a very long time and must continue to be leaders in this critical issue. This decisions we make now will impact our future and the generations to come.

Climate change is something I am very passionate about because my family has experienced first-hand some of these devastating effects. We live on the side of a hill in between Santa Rosa and Calistoga in Northern California. In my 15 years of life there have been five wildfires that have come close to my house. We have had to evacuate three of the five times, the first when I was six years old. I will never forget the fear I felt of losing the only home I have lived in.

As I grew older I began to learn about climate change and the drought in California. I soon realized that there were things that I could do to be proactive in fighting these issues. I became involved with the fight against climate change in my home town by becoming the vice president of my school’s eco club, and an active member of the Youth Advisory Board for the Center of Climate protection in Sonoma County. I have also had the privilege to help coordinate the Youth for Environmental Sustainability conference to help teach other teens in Northern California about the severity of climate change, especially in California with the drought. Through this process I have learned how my actions can make a difference, and I encouraged my family to drive an electric car and turn to alternative energy options, both of which we have accomplished.

Supporting this bill is important to us 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) Destruction of the Earth is not only the cause, but the effect of climate change. This as well as in Ecclesiastes 1:4: “One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but Enoch has seen a voice in these times. These communities, the environment and the next generation are those most affected by the decisions we make. Global heat levels have steadily been increasing since the industrial revolution and will continue to do so unless our country takes action. We must find a way to lessen the negative changes that we have already made to the environment, while finding a way to prevent these issues from increasing. The US has been a leader in new technology and advances for a very long time and must continue to be leaders in this critical issue. This decisions we make now will impact our future and the generations to come.

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Refugee Crisis
Alana Cree, Mia Zechowy, Bella Nadler, Jacob Banks, Jackson Nadler-Block

George Washington once said, “The bosom of America is open to receive....the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions.” As you are well aware, the world is in the midst of one of the worst refugee crisis in modern history. These problems have already been dramatically affected by the new administration in 2017. Today, we would like to express the way our Jewish values align with this issue and we would like to thank you for your support in opposing the President’s executive orders.

Currently refugees from around the world are seeking sanctuary in developed nations. As a land of refuge and democracy, this issue is incredibly important to our nation and its citizens. The amount of refugees has more than doubled since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, significantly increasing the amount of people seeking refuge in the United States. During his presidency, President Obama took actions to aid in this global concern but these steps have been greatly halted in the past month.

Following President Trump’s inauguration in January 2017, an executive order was signed that severely curtailed the US Refugee Resettlement Program. The executive order includes many provisions that defy the ideals that make the United States unique. An aspect of this executive order halts visas for people from seven Muslim majority nations which is a defiance on our founding principle of religious freedom. These freedoms date back to the pilgrims that came to current America in search of safety from religious persecution. Lastly the executive order caps the total number of refugees to be resettled in 2017 at 50,000 which means that thousands will lose the opportunity to gain refuge in the United States.

As reform Jews, we have a unique connection to this issue and our stance is in support of treating refugees with justice and compassion. Throughout history, the Jewish people have continuously suffered with the persecution of our people. The Torah says that “You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were the strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:21) In our communities, we choose to embrace the newcomer and we have empathy for those who feel they must flee their homes for the safety of them and their families. The Jewish values that are rooted in the Torah teach us to reach out and care for vulnerable populations. The American government has a duty to our power and strength to benefit those who are in need, such as refugees. The refugee crisis could be solved with the spread of chesed, the Hebrew word for kindness.

As American Jews, many of us feel a personal connection with today’s refugees. Many Jewish people are descendants of refugees who fled from rampant religious persecution to come to America in search of a safer future for their children. I am no different. My great-grandmother was living in Lithuania prior to World War I. Her parents chose to immigrate to the United States, sensing the rapid increase in anti-Semitism across Europe. Her parents decided to take a temporary trip to America and left my grandmother and her older brother in Lithuania with relatives. They planned to return for their children once they acquired jobs and a home, however halfway through their trip, World War I broke out and all travel to Lithuania became impossible.

At the time my great grandmother was five, and her older brother was eight. Upon hearing news of the war, their relatives abandoned them at an orphanage where they were beaten mercilessly for being Jewish. It did not take long for them to decide that they needed to run away, and find a way to America to reunite with their family. Nobody would imagine that two unaccompanied children, aged five and eight, could navigate their way to the United States by themselves. Incredibly, they managed to join their parents in America to begin a new and better life. Similar to my great-grandmother’s story, refugees today continue the fight to gain access to the United States. Over half of the world’s current refugees are under the age of eighteen and many of them leave school for extended periods of time or fall prey to exploitation.

George Washington, our first President, acknowledged that America is a place for acceptance of oppressed persons and for that it is imperative that the United States takes a strong stance on refugees. We ask that you continue to oppose limitations on refugee resettlement that limit entry solely based on race, religion or national origin. We also ask that you support robust funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement as a part of the Department of Health and Human Services. Thank you for your time and consideration and for listening to our religious stance on this issue.

Reproductive Rights and Sex Education
Natalie Lasker, Celia Rose, Nadav Wichmann

As I’m sure you know, the United States has one of the highest teen birth rates in the developed world; this is in a large part due to a curriculum that emphasizes that “abstinence from all sexual activity” is the only effective and appropriate approach to sex. There is a reason why 80% of Americans favor courses that teach contraception and disease prevention in addition to abstinence, and why close to 70% of Americans oppose federal funding for programs that do not teach of condoms and contraception.

Young people of the United States, while they make up only one quarter of the sexually active population, contract almost half of the 20 million STDs annually. Approximately 62% of all women of reproductive age are currently using a contraceptive method and about one in eight women will develop invasive breast cancer during the course of her lifetime. Comprehensive sexuality education empowers young adults by enabling them to understand and make informed choices about reproductive health issues.

This issue is highly significant to me as a Reform Jew as well. In our religious texts, Leviticus 19:12, the guiding principle of sexuality is K’doshim tih’yu, or in English, “You shall be holy”. Holiness can be interpreted in this setting as self-respect and the innate divinity of knowledge. The RAC feels that providing young adults with accurate and comprehensive sex education allows them to respect themselves and their bodies.

I believe that we also have a societal obligation to provide detailed sex education to our students, as a lack of access to such vital information can potentially endanger lives through STDs and unsafe pregnancies. The Talmud, an ancient Jewish text, states “One who saves one life, it is accounted as a world is saved.” If abstinence-only sex education is endangering lives, it must be replaced.

Reproductive rights can be difficult to discuss, but it affects our friends and family especially when it reaches my community on a personal level. For example, I have a friend who was 15 in a private Catholic high school that provided no options for sex education other than abstinence-only. She had unprotected sex with a similarly educated peer. She was convinced she was pregnant due to a faulty pregnancy test, and because her parents did not approve of her having sex, they did not give her the comfort and support she needed at the time.

As a result, she panicked and dropped out of school before discovering the truth: she wasn’t pregnant. Because of her lack of knowledge with contraceptives, she lost her education due to the rumors and stress that surrounded her. When my friend told me this I was in shock, because if she had a good education and a comprehensive sexuality class in school, she wouldn’t have been in that horrible situation and wouldn’t I have had to start thinking about changing her life due to a high school pregnancy. This is why teens must be informed on this critical topic in school. No one deserves to be put in a situation where they must come up with a new way to live at such a young age.

I strongly urge congressman/woman Thompson/Feinstein to co-sponsor the Real Education for Healthy Youth Act, which was H.R. 1706/S. 2765 in the 114th Congress, or similar legislation when it is introduced in the 115th Congress. Evidence-based and medically accurate comprehensive sexuality education has been proven to significantly reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, and models healthy relationships for our youth. We would like to see our congressmen support legislation to improve comprehensive sex education, and to ensure access to reproductive health for all.

Pictured on PAGE 6
Pictured on PAGE 7
American Support of Israel

Eden Luvishis, Nate Rowand, Lucas Navarro, Cyrus Siegel

If you ask me, my friends, or even my parents what the many persistent questions on our mind are, many will answer “What college should I attend?” Many will spend their time researching a “dream school” based on majors, tuition, sports teams, or maybe just proximity to home. However, every time I consider a school, I have a different question on my mind: How many anti-Semitic incidents have you had last year? Will I feel unsafe at this school? There has been a startling rise of anti-Semitism on California campuses, and many incidents go unreported.

Personally, I know of at least one incident that was never reported. My friend, attending UC Irvine at the time, came back from a long day of school to find a swastika drawn on her dorm room door. Immediately, she went to the campus police who told her the same thing many Jewish students will hear at some point in their lives: “We can’t do anything, the incident was not big enough.” We have come to associate anti-Semitism with Hitler, with mass genocide, ghettos, and major persecution. Yet something so massive starts on a much smaller scale. We must remain vigilant in the face of anti-Semitism to prevent it from developing further.

Today, much anti-Semitism can be linked to anti-Zionist sentiments on school campuses, especially in California. However, much of the anti-Zionist sentiment is caused by Israel’s negative portrayal in the news and media. Many people rely on news channels that seem to hold Israel to a double standard that other nations are not subjected to. Yet many do not realize that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East as well as a sanctuary for Jewish refugees from all around the world while hosting the biggest LGBTQ parade in the world.

Despite all of this, Israel is often depicted as an apartheid state whose only goal is persecuting Palestinian Arabs. These radical and false views are a leading cause of anti-Semitic movements and BDS resolutions on college campuses. However, Israel support cannot stop on the governmental level. We must work within our own borders to reform the current false opinions of Israel. The line between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is so thin that the two are nearly interchangeable.

As Jews we are guided by the principle that, in the words of Rabbi Ben Gamliel, “The world is sustained by three things, by justice, by truth, and by peace.” The current image of Israel in the minds of the public is not just. Many claims causing this negative view are not truthful. Therefore, the only way to achieve lasting peace is by changing this perspective.

In order to change public attitude we must sway public opinion. The community generally respects the government’s opinion once resolutions or laws are enacted, so overt support of Israel by the US government could change the people’s stance and Israel’s portrayal in the media. Thus, we thank you for your support of Israel and implore you to vote for foreign aid for Israel as a demonstration of American support. As Jewish tradition says, “Tzedek, Tzedek Tiridin” – Justice, justice shall you pursue.

Criminal Justice

Isabella Clark and Avery Cruz

As you know, in the 1980s, in response to rising crime rates and social unrest, the American public along with the federal government adopted a “tough on crime” attitude in the form of mandatory minimums. Mandatory minimums have contributed to the United State’s incarceration rate, which is currently the second highest in the world. Today roughly 2 million people are incarcerated within the federal, state, and local prisons and jails. On the federal level half of prisoners are serving time for drug crimes. These federal prisons have been overflowing for years, and are continually rising at exponential rates. The mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug crimes are shockingly high, and have not shown a high positive impact on society.

As Reform Jews, we strongly believe in the power of redemption. We believe that an individual who is sentenced to prison should be given rehabilitation and treatment, as well as a second chance. In the Tanakh, it says that “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn away from his life and live” (Ezekiel 33:11). Meaning that an individual should not be given harsh punishment, but rather the individual should be rehabilitated and given another chance. Serving a prison sentence does not ensure that an individual will not commit another crime, which is why rehabilitation is necessary to ensure that the individual would get needed treatment and the tools for a second chance. In cases with individuals convicted of non-violent drug crime, they should be given proper rehabilitation services and treatment.

My colleague and I both have lived very different lives. We grew up in different towns and go to different schools in different locations. However, the issue of criminal justice has brought us together because we feel the issue of criminal justice is very significant. Neither of us have been connected with anyone who has been prosecuted or convicted of a non-violent drug crime, yet our introduction to this topic is very similar.

In my first semester of school this year, a course taught about criminal justice and the issues and topics surrounding it. I was very intrigued by the information I learned and developed a passion for criminal justice reform. When I was 12, I watched an episode of “Last Week Tonight” about overflow in prisons. This got me – a 12-year-old girl – into the topic of criminal justice reform. From then on, I became more enveloped in criminal justice reform and criminal law. Now at 15, I have not lost my drive and this is one of the main reasons I want to get involved with law.

As you know, in the 114th congress, bipartisan legislation was introduced that contained all the points that we have talked about today. It would reduce mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent drug offences and offer pathways for rehabilitation for individuals. We urge the representative to support reintroduction of legislation like the sentencing reform act (HR 3713) to create fairer sentencing laws, improve prison practices, and encourage successful reentry.