



CONGREGATION
SHOMREI TORAH
שומרי תורה

2023 L'Taken

Social Justice Seminars

Religious Action Center
of Reform Judaism

EVERY YEAR over 2000 high-school aged students participate in the Religious Action Center's L'Taken Seminar in Washington, D.C. In February 2023, twelve of those teens were from Congregation Shomrei Torah.

L'Taken is designed to expose students to public policy issues, explore Jewish values surrounding these issues, and teach the skills of an effective advocate. Throughout the weekend, students are given the tools to write a persuasive and passionate speech on a topic of their choice, to be presented to our senators and representatives.

Lobbying a member of congress is a deeply meaningful experience, and one that can have a significant impact on the course of legislation.

Students also visit the National Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Smithsonian National Mall, and celebrate *Havdallah* at the Jefferson Memorial. They have the chance to meet and mingle with hundreds of Reform Jews from across the United States, all of whom are in Washington D.C. for the same reason—to pursue *tikkun olam*.



JUSTICE JUSTICE *YOU SHALL PURSUE*

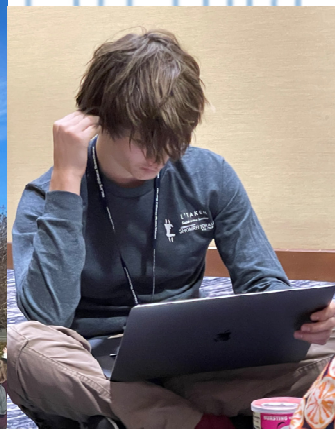
On the weekend of **February 10-13, 2023**, twelve youth representatives from Congregation Shomrei Torah, along with Brandon Binder, Director of STaRS and Teen Engagement, and Executive Director Katie Evenbeck traveled to Washington D.C. for the annual L'Taken program.

The Shomrei Torah cohort joined over 500 youth from throughout the United States to learn more about policy issues, speech writing, and the importance of using our values and voice to create change.

Our delegation broke into groups and presented speeches to Senate and Congressional staff on the following topics: **Environment, Mental Health, and Reproductive Rights.**



Participants: Gavriella Geffner, Ari Gershen, Ella Kushins, Alanna Magers, Lily Matalon, Willa Navarro, Max Schneider, Ben Siegel, Nathan Spanier, Hannah Westerhold, Ronan Yarbrough, David Zechow. Chaperones: Brandon Binder, Katie Evenbeck



Environment

Written by Lily Matalon, Hannah Westerhold, Max Schneider, Nathan Spanier

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with us today. We are in Washington with hundreds of other teens from the Reform Jewish Movement to participate in the L'Taken seminar, an intensive four-day program, focused on Jewish values and social justice, sponsored by the Religious Action Center, which is the social justice office of the Union for Reform Judaism whose nearly 850 congregations across North America encompass 1.8 million Reform Jews, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), whose membership includes over 2000 Reform rabbis. Today, our group would like to discuss environmental issues.

Many Americans are worried about climate change and for good reasons. We as humans are enhancing greenhouse gasses causing extreme weather conditions. These conditions will lead to 250,000 more deaths per year from heat, famine and diseases. Between 2030-2050 climate change will cause the earth to raise 1.5 degrees and will cause less rain, less food, and more problems for us Americans. For these reasons we as the American people need to act so that it does not happen!

Jewish Tradition and text talks in detail about the environment and our control and privilege as humans around it. In Genesis 2:15, the Torah states "The human being was placed in the Garden of Eden to till it and tend it." This quote shows how Jews were obligated to take care of the Earth and make it a cleaner place.

The Talmud also talks about how the environment and how we affect it. The Talmudic story of a sage named Honi perfectly describes Jewish values on climate and the environment. The story is about a man who walks up to Honi as the sage was planting a tree. The man asks Honi "How many years will it take for this tree to give forth its fruit." Honi responds "It would take 70 years." The man is baffled by Honi's answer. "Are you so healthy a man to live that length of time and eat its fruit." The sage comments, "I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. So,

will too I plant for my children."

Jewish tradition tells us that we have to plant and tend to the world since we will have children that will one day inhabit this Earth and they deserve to have the same planet we had. The Talmud teaches us that as Jews and Americans, we have control over the Earth but we do not have the license to harm and pollute the planet.

At 1:00 in the morning on Monday October 9, 2017, my family quickly packed up a few items and evacuated our house. I could see the blazing hills in the distance; the orange flames seemed to be inching toward us. We quickly took off, and the reality of the situation sunk in. I looked back at my house, the one a.m. moonlight combined with the orange haze shining down upon it. I was already mourning the things I had left behind; my favorite clothes, my stuffed animals, photo albums, and most importantly the memories that took place in my childhood home. I imagined the walls that had seen me at my best and at my worst, burning to ash.

We were lucky to have close friends in a neighboring town that took us in, and let us along with some other evacuees sleep on the floor of their living room for a week. The fire reached across the street from my house, and for over a year there was no green to be seen, just ash. Now, every year we have a "fire season." During this time, ash falls from the brown clouds of smoke and I keep a packed bag of sentimental items that I could easily grab if I need to evacuate. This has caused me and many Californians extreme anxiety, and I am worried for the sake of our planet.

So why are we here talking to you? Four California teens, all the way in Washington DC. We are here to ask you to support the Environmental Justice for All Act, which was introduced in the 117th congress as S 872, by Senator Tammy Duckworth. This act will integrate environmental justice into the Clean Air and Clean Water Act. This legislation targets environmental racism, fighting against zoning practices that cause black people to breathe more polluted air and become 5 times more likely to develop asthma. Not only will the Environmental Justice for All Act fight for minority communities disproportionately affected by climate change, but it will include these communities, including indigenous peoples, in the discussion about climate racism.

This Environmental Justice for All Act will establish grants to protect access to national parks. Justice for All means that these predominantly Black Indigenous People of Color will be taught their civil rights related to climate justice and accessing these parks. Climate justice for all means that areas that are dependent on fossil fuels are not left behind to deal with a shift to clean energy, but their economies are supported instead.

Senator Padilla, please, we are asking for your support on the Environmental Justice for All Act to support the American people, especially people of color and people living in environmental hazards, in the midst of climate injustices, to transition to a more sustainable world.



MENTAL HEALTH

Written by Ben Siegel, Ronan Yarbrough, Ari Gershen, David Zechow

In any given year, a reported 1 in 6 youth from ages 6-17 experience a serious mental health disorder, of which there are many types. Traumatic events can have a drastic effect on young people and how they develop into adults. If we truly value the health of the people of this country then we must also value its mental health.

Mental and physical health should be considered equally important. Support for mental health when young can decrease problems in adults and trains youths to be open about their struggles. The best way to solve the problem of poor mental health in youths and adults is to cut it out at the root. We can do this by increasing funding for schools' mental health support facilities. It is important that it is in school because not everybody has the ability to get outside help, and since everyone is at school already then it is convenient. The mental health of the population is important to the development of our youth and the future generations of our country.

As Jews, this issue is relevant to us. Jewish tradition teaches us that (although they are separate) mental health is of equal importance to physical health. This is cited in the traditional "Mi Shebeirach" meaning "Prayer for Healing". In "Mi Shebeirach" we pray for "r'fuat hanefesh ur'fuat haguf" which means "a healing of the body and spirit." The "spirit" mentioned in this prayer refers to one's mental health.

Judaism teaches that the government has an obligation to give access to healthcare services, this includes mental healthcare. The Jewish scholar and physician Maimonides stated "When one is overpowered by imagination, prolonged meditation and avoidance of social contact, which he never exhibited before, or when one avoids pleasant experiences which were in him before, the physician should do nothing before he improves the soul by removing the extreme emotions." A physician must check their patient's mental health before providing for their physical health. They need to be in an emotionally calm state in order to be properly cared for.

I personally have struggled with mental health, which eventually led to my hospitalization and residential treatment. When I got back to school, I was lucky to have supportive people in my academic life to help me catch up with the work from the 2 months I missed, but I only had this because I went to a school that prioritizes mental health. I have a friend that went to a bigger school, and he didn't have any of the personalized support he needed when he returned from treatment.

After returning home, I contacted my peers about their experiences returning to school. Many of them lacked the support they needed to catch up and continue to make progress in bettering their mental health. If it had been passed before going to residential treatment, the Mental Health Services for Students Act could have helped them and people like them all across the country get the help they needed from their schools. People like these friends and I would greatly benefit from the Act.

The Mental Health Services for Students Act of 2021 (H.R.721), introduced in the 117th Congress, would have drastically increased the outreach and effectiveness of mental health services in public schools by providing \$200 million in grant funding per year for five years to award individual grants of up to \$2 million to help schools partner with community mental health professionals to provide on-site care, train school personnel to recognize mental and behavioral issues, facilitate community partnerships to improve mental health education, and establish mechanisms for students to report incidents or plans of violence by other students, adolescents, or adults.

But unfortunately, this bill did not pass the Senate. We urge you to co-sponsor this bill when it is reintroduced. For so many students, this would be their only access to mental health care. The mental health of our youth is vital to the welfare of our future.





Reproductive Rights

Written by Gavriella Geffner, Ella Kushins, Willa Navarro, Alanna Magers

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with us today. We would like to discuss several different issues with you today. We are here to talk to you about Reproductive Rights and our colleagues will be speaking on Mental Health support.

My name is Gavriella Geffner and I use she/her pronouns. We are from Congregation Shomrei Torah in Santa Rosa, California. We'd like to thank you again for taking the time to listen to us and consider our requests. Today we'd like to speak to you about the reproductive rights for people in the United States.

We are in full belief that each person should have agency and autonomy over their own bodies. In result of Roe v. Wade being overturned, we have seen certain organizations and religious groups around the country, as well as elected and appointed officials chipping away at reproductive rights and making it a major political matter.

Currently, abortion is banned in eighteen states and in others it can be next to impossible to get access to a safe abortion. In instances like these, there are barriers such as geography, mandatory waiting periods, biased counseling with inaccurate scare tactics, and parental consent laws for minors. Abortion restrictions and bans disproportionately hurt those who already face discrimination in health care including; people of color, indigenous, disabled, young, LGBTQ+ people, immigrants, and low income citizens. Although California provides us with protection from these obstacles, every day we see and hear terrible reports of people left without this protection. As Americans, it is crucial to us that every person has the right to choose and have control over their own bodies. As Reform Jews, we feel obligated to use our voices to help the unprotected.

Within the Jewish faith, we believe life to be sacred. We are inspired by the Jewish belief of kavod ha'briyot or re-

spect for individual dignity. Mishna Ohalot (7:6) forbids a pregnant person from continuing a pregnancy if it becomes life threatening, for their life comes before the fetus. Even in our most sacred text, honoring existing life is of utmost importance. The term 'life threatening' not only refers to physical but mental health as well as financial stability. When a pregnant person deems their situation to be life threatening in any way, we strongly believe the choice should always be theirs to make.

Deuteronomy (4:15) states "You shall indeed guard your souls". This has traditionally been interpreted to protect our healthcare in a multitude of ways. The Torah commands us to save endangered life which is why these rights are crucial in continuing as students, citizens, and individuals within this country.

I'm a second semester high school Junior, which means it's college search and application time. As I'm building my list I'm learning all about the amazing colleges that the U.S. has to offer. However, my college options are severely limited because I want to go to a college in a state where I have rights. Specifically access to reproductive health care, for if I ever find myself in a position of need.

Even though, as a Californian, I have the right to reproductive healthcare within my state, I am still held back from academic and potential life fulfillment due to the lack of a national protection of reproductive health care. Providing people with a choice gives them the freedoms of autonomy, individualism, and the basic human right of the ability to make your own choices about your own life. We ask you as participants in the Religious Action Center, but also as Californians and as Jewish American youth to support the Women's Health Protection Act (WHPA).

The Women's Health Protection Act (H.R. 8296 in the 117th Congress), establishes a statutory right for health care providers to provide, and their patients to receive, abortion care free from medically unnecessary restrictions, limitations, and bans that delay, and at times, completely obstruct, access to abortion. WHPA would codify the protections of Roe v. Wade, making abortion rights legal across the country. WHPA takes crucial steps towards restoring access to abortion by creating federal protections against state restrictions and bans on the basis that such restrictions fail to protect reproductive health and intrude upon personal decision-making and moral agency.





In the 117th Congress, WHPA was passed by the House of Representatives. The Senate failed to advance and pass WHPA. The bill now needs to be reintroduced in the 118th Congress. We thank Representative Huffman for voting for the Women's Health Protection Act in the 117th Congress, and urge him to continue to support the bill in 118th Congress. This act is incredibly important to us as Jewish youth and we thank you for your time and consideration.



L'taken 2023



בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁנָּתַתָּ לָנוּ הַזְדַּמְנוּת לְתַקֵּן אֶת-הָעוֹלָם

*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.*

