

Responding to Parents' Questions:

Talking points for chaperones about the Religious Action Center and the *L'Taken* program



What is the Religious Action Center?

For 50 years, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism ("the RAC") has been the hub of Jewish social justice and legislative activity in Washington, D.C. As the D.C. office of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the RAC educates and mobilizes the Reform Jewish community on legislative and social concerns, advocating on nearly 60 issues on which our parent organizations take positions, including economic justice, civil rights, religious liberty, support for Israel and more. We are non-partisan and do not endorse or oppose any political parties or candidates for office.

The RAC's work is mandated and supported by the Union for Reform Judaism, whose 900+ congregations across North America include 1.5 million Reform Jews, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), whose membership includes more than 1,800 Reform rabbis.

What is the *L'Taken* Social Justice Seminar?

The Bernard and Audre Rapoport *L'Taken* Social Justice Seminar for High School Students is an intensive four-day study *kallah* in Washington, D.C., focusing on Jewish values and social justice. Participants engage in: **Torah - Jewish Learning** about social justice values, the legislative process, and the policy and the societal realms in which they can engage; **Avodah - Prayer** connecting holiness and justice through creative worship services; and **Gemilut Chasadim - Action** by visiting Capitol Hill to advocate in their Senators' and Representatives' offices for the issues that have just learned about.

How does the RAC choose which policy issues to teach about at *L'Taken*?

Every *L'Taken* seminar addresses 10-12 different issue areas in a variety of interactive formats. These issues, ranging from Global HIV/AIDS to women's rights, from Israel to environmental and economic justice, are selected based on both the current legislative agenda and issues of primary concern to the Reform Movement, such as Israel's security and well-being. The students are exposed to multiple perspectives on the issues, the Jewish values, texts and teachings that guide our thinking, and the positions adopted by the Reform Movement.

What does it mean that the RAC does non-partisan advocacy work?

Part of the great religious prophetic tradition is to explore what is broken in our world and, inspired by our faith, work to repair it. The First Amendment to the Constitution recognized the importance of the religious voice when it ensured that the government would not be allowed to stifle that voice. With that right comes the responsibility to engage in discussions about public policy in a non-partisan way.

Like every other religious denomination in America, the RAC's positions are based on the consensus of decision-making processes of its national organization. The RAC does not speak for each of the members of Reform Jewish congregations and cherishes the rich diversity of views among those members.

The RAC, like Reform synagogues and other religious organizations across the U.S. is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt religious organization. This status allows us to engage in advocacy about the issues we care about as Jews and Americans. (For example, we advocate on issues ranging from increased funding for child nutrition programs to strong North American leadership in the Middle East peace process.) At the same time, our tax status forbids us from endorsing or opposing any political candidate or party. In shorthand: we engage on issues, not individuals.

While the general stance of the positions taken by our national organizations are moderate-liberal, reflecting the trend of the broader Jewish community at the polls, the RAC has played a distinctive role in forging bi-partisan and interfaith coalitions during Congresses and Administrations controlled by both parties that have been effective in finding common ground. We take seriously the importance of being non-partisan and welcome opportunities to work with elected officials from across the political spectrum.

How are the positions of the Reform Movement decided?

The Religious Action Center implements the policy positions adopted by the Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Ultimately it is the members and rabbis of Reform congregations who set the policy for the Movement. During the Union for Reform Judaism's Biennial General Assembly, nearly 2,000 delegates from the majority of our 900 member congregations consider, debate and vote on resolutions that reflect the consensus positions of our membership. Similarly, at the annual conference of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the rabbis vote directly on the policy positions of the CCAR. In our work, we never claim that these positions reflect the view of every Reform Jew; only that they are democratically-decided policies of the institution. The democratic process and the commitment of the Reform Movement to speak out on issues of concern is as old as the Movement itself, and is evidenced by the hundreds of resolutions adopted since its inception. All resolutions are posted at www.urj.org/resolutions.

How are diverse opinions explored and encouraged throughout the conference?

During the opening, Friday night sermon at the L'Taken seminar, the Program Director emphasizes the importance of respecting and exploring diverse viewpoints, reminding students that while the Reform Movement has taken a particular stance on each of the issues that we explore, our tradition values debates and discussion around issues. He encourages students to picture a page of Talmud, where both the majority opinion and the minority opinion are preserved and respected. The value of considering multiple perspectives on a particular policy issue is reiterated in different ways throughout our programming. A few examples:

- 1) In the L'Taken Seminar's flagship program, "*Kesef, Koach, & Politika*" or "*Money, Power, & Politics*," students are exposed to different forms of advocacy, including lobbying, writing letters, making phone calls, writing op-eds, staging rallies, creating television commercials, and donating money to a Political Action Committee. At the start of the program, each student is randomly assigned to one of two teams, each representing a different side of a given issue. The teams are tasked with convincing three Senators to vote for their position. (For example, when the issue was the Assault Weapons Ban, the Jewish Rifle Association (JRA) tried to convince the Senators to vote against a federal ban on assault weapons while Jews Against Guns (JAG) tried to convince the Senators to vote in favor of the ban.) The students are responsible for learning their team's position on the issue as well as the position of the opposing team in order to be the best advocates for their position. The students do not learn the stance of the Reform Movement on

the issue until the end of the program, after they have already explored multiple perspectives and engaged deeply with their team's arguments.

- 2) In a program on Stem Cell Research (one of eight programs that students can choose for a small-group learning experience), students rotate around 5 different stations to speak with characters who all have different viewpoints on whether the federal government should fund embryonic stem cell research. Chaperones adopt the roles of a Conservative Christian Minister, a Scientist, a Concerned Citizen, a Rabbi and a Parkinson's Patient and share their characters' perspectives with the students, encouraging them to ask questions and dig deeper to learn more about these differing viewpoints.
- 3) In the program on Immigration Reform (one of eight programs that students can choose for a small-group learning experience), the students participate in a political talk show about the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act. The students are randomly assigned to one of four organizations, which have different perspectives on the Act. They must learn the position of their organization and engage in debate with the other organizations about the issue.

Should I send my student on this program if I don't personally agree with all of the Reform Movement's policy positions?

Absolutely. The weekend is primarily about skills building. Over the course of the weekend, students learn the importance of civic responsibility and acquire valuable skills to help make their voices heard on issues of importance to them throughout their lives. We give students the tools to be effective advocates— instructing them how to best communicate the messages they wish to advance. Perhaps most importantly, after experiencing a L'Taken weekend, students are empowered by the realization that they are capable of crafting a persuasive, passionate and convincing argument on an issue that they care about—whatever their views. We hope and expect that students who have completed the L'Taken program will remain advocates, actively engaged in their communities throughout their lives.

Are L'Taken participants required to advocate the positions of the Reform Movement?

No student will ever be asked to advocate a position with which he or she disagrees. Each student speaks on only one topic during the group's visit to Capitol Hill. Since they are on Capitol Hill representing our Movement, we do ask that students select an issue with which they agree with the position of the Reform Movement. We work closely with individual students to explore the issues and answer their questions to ensure they are comfortable with and knowledgeable about the issue. Throughout the weekend, a broad range of issues are addressed -- including those affecting the U.S. (e.g. homelessness), the world (e.g. the crisis in Darfur), and Israel (e.g. the peace process). Students are almost always able to identify an issue that they are excited to speak about.

During our lobby preparation process, we always offer to schedule visits for students in their home states with Members of Congress if they are unable to lobby on an issue that they are particularly passionate about. We strongly encourage all participants to take seriously the right and opportunity they have to make their voices heard, regardless of their views on the issues that we present.

The RAC staff is always available to address any questions that you have about our programming and/or approach to the issues that we discuss. For more information, contact Legislative Director Barbara Weinstein at 202-387-2800 or bweinstein@rac.org.