



Jewish Institute
for Liberal
Values

Guided Discussion on Liberal Values

Overview 10 minutes

Exercise 1: What Liberal Mean to Me 20 Minutes

Exercise 2: Case Studies on Liberal Values 30 Minutes

Key Liberal Values

- **Individualism** – the belief in the importance/primacy of the individual
- **Freedom** – the ability to think, speak or act as one wishes (with a special emphasis on preserving a *culture* of free speech)
- **Viewpoint diversity** (also “Pluralism”) - a willingness to share society and institutions, and cooperate when possible, with people with whom we disagree.
- Jewish Value: ***Makhloket Leshem Shamayim*** – Arguments for the Sake of Heaven

What Liberal Values Mean to Me

Directions: Break up into groups of four. Participants should read the quotes on their own. They should then pair up and discuss the questions below for two minutes. They should then expand the discussion to the group of four for four minutes. Afterwards, the question is discussed by all attendees (This exercise format is called 1-2-4-All, which ensures that all voices are heard).

Do any of these statements on liberal values stand out for you? What resonates with you and why? What, if anything, do you disagree with? What do liberal values mean to you?

Select Quotes on Liberal Values

Francis Fukuyama: “Liberal values like tolerance and individual freedom are prized most intensely when they are denied: People who live in brutal dictatorships want the simple freedom to speak, associate, and worship as they choose. But over time life in a liberal society comes to be taken for granted and its sense of shared community seems thin.”

Helen Pluckrose: “I don’t believe what you believe, and I don’t have to. I defend your right to hold, express and live by your own belief system, but you have no right to impose any of it on me.”

John Stuart Mill: “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.”

John Stuart Mill: “In this age, the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric.”

John Stuart Mill: “The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.”

Thorstein Veblen (Quoted in Sapir): “The skepticism that goes to make him (The Jew) an effectual factor in the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men involves a loss of that peace of mind that is the birthright of the safe and sane quietist. He becomes a disturber of the intellectual peace, but only at the cost of becoming an intellectual wayfaring man, a wanderer in the intellectual no-man’s-land, seeking another place of rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon.”

Greg Lukianoff: “The concept of freedom of speech is a bigger, older and more expansive idea than its particular application in the First Amendment. A belief in the importance of freedom of speech is what inspired the First Amendment; it’s what gave the First Amendment meaning, and what sustains it in the law. But a strong *cultural commitment to freedom of speech* is what maintains its practice in our institutions—from higher education, to reality TV, to pluralistic democracy itself. Freedom of speech

includes small liberal values that were once expressed in common American idioms like to each his own, everyone's entitled to their opinion and it's a free country."

Leon Wieseltier: The Jewish tradition—the tradition of the argumentative Jew—is a long and great challenge to the consensualist mentality. It repudiates, sometimes in theory, always in practice, the cult of unanimity...In the Jewish tradition, disagreement is not only real, it is also ideal—at least in the unredeemed world, which is the only world we know. In its millennia of disputations, even mistaken opinions are not without legitimacy. Minority opinions are not obsolete opinions: They are preserved alongside majority opinions because their reasoning may one day be useful again. Arguments that are adjudicated practically remain alive theoretically. Indeed, both sides of a particular argument may be "the words of the living God."

Wesley Yang: The successor ideology is what happens when ideas meant to encourage critical self-reflection become a part of an echo chamber and grow increasingly divorced from reality. The list takes on the coloration of every romantic, reactionary, and left-wing shibboleth ever created...It comes from a *succession* from a liberal account that emphasizes laws and rights and is fundamentally grounded in individual agency to a more Foucaultian account of the operation of power."

Case Studies: Groups of Four

Directions: Each group will be given a primary case study, When completed, they'll move on to another of their choice (20 minutes). The whole group will come back together to discuss for 10 minutes.

Case Study One

The public school system is developing a new curriculum for 12th grade social studies. A group of teachers recommended that the 12th graders read Ibram X. Kendi's book "How to be an Antiracist." Kendi states, "When I see racial disparities, I see racism." In Kendi's view, racial inequity "is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing." He states that "one either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an anti-racist." Some parents expressed their opposition to their kids reading at the school board meeting. The teachers who proposed it are adamant that the school not allow a few parents to prevent the school from reckoning with racism.

The school should:

- A. Not teach Kendi at all
- B. Teach Kendi
- C. Teach Kendi alongside a critique of his work

Discuss...

Case Study Two

A synagogue adult education program discussed holding an education series on issues surrounding gender identity. One committee member recommended bringing in as a speaker a local trans activist who is on the frontlines of the current debate. Another member of the committee suggested that the group also hear from Abigail Shrier, a controversial author who wrote a book arguing that more and more teen girls are identifying as trans because of “social contagion.” Another committee member spoke out: “My daughter is trans, and I find Abigail Shrier’s views completely transphobic. I will not be part of any series and I don’t even want to be part of any group that would read her, which is like reading a Holocaust denier.” The committee chair and the Rabbi were set to discuss the matter. They should:

- A. Scrap the whole idea of the education series
- B. Not invite either speaker
- C. Invite the trans activist but not Shrier
- D. Invite Shrier but not the trans activist

Discuss...

Case Study Three

Jesse is a Board member for a mainstream Jewish organization. A staff member from that organization with whom she had worked closely approached her privately to discuss concerns about an upcoming DEI training for staff conducted by an outside consulting firm. The staff person shared the following description of the training: “We will include spaces for white professionals to take part in a white antiracist affinity space. A white anti-racist affinity space is one where white people can process their emotions and deepen their understanding around race and racism, without burdening or causing additional harm to People of Color.” The description went on to say that participants will “learn how to recognize the invisibility of “whiteness” (including patriarchal,

heteronormative, Puritan values) that have become normalized and how to disrupt our daily acts of "whiteness" (behaviors and actions we may perpetuate unknowingly as they have been adapted overtime and deemed "the standard" but may or may not be useful to our efforts towards creating communities of belonging)." Jesse was taken aback by the DEI description. The staff member told Jesse: "I strongly disagree with the content of this training but I worry that if I try to opt out it will brand me as a racist and compromise me professionally."

Do you consider the training problematic? Why or why not? What should the Board member do with the information the staff person provided?