

DEBATING GUIDE
JUDAISM'S GREAT DEBATES

by

Rabbi Barry L. Schwartz

PART ONE:

ROOM FOR DEBATE:

Questions for Reflection, Discussion, and Formal Argumentation
Three text questions and three contemporary debate topics for each of the ten chapters

PART TWO:

THE ART OF DEBATE:

A brief outline explaining how to run a formal debate in the classroom

1.

ROOM FOR DEBATE:

Questions for Reflection, Discussion, and Formal Argumentation

Chapter I- Abraham and God

The text (Genesis 18:22-32)

1. Does “the Judge of all the earth deal justly” in the Genesis account?
2. Does Abraham have the right to question God?
3. Does Abraham win this debate, or God?

Contemporary issues:

1. When is collective punishment morally acceptable?
2. Was the collective punishment of the Japanese by the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki justified?
3. Are civilians who aid terrorists innocent and deserving of non-combatant immunity?

Chapter II: Moses and Korah

The text (Numbers 16:1-16)

1. Should Moses have been willing to listen to Korah?
2. Does Korah have a case that all are holy?
3. Were Korah and his followers legitimate dissenters?

Contemporary issues:

1. Is Jerusalem a holy city, and subject to political negotiation?
2. Is the Sabbath holy, and requiring cessation from work?
3. Is the Bible holy, and God’s word?

Chapter III: The Five Daughters and the Twelve Tribes

The text (Numbers 27:1-11, 36:1-12)

1. Is the compromise of women inheriting but marrying within the tribe a good one?
2. Are women second class citizens under biblical law?
3. Can the *halacha* regarding the traditional role of women be categorized as separate but equal?

Contemporary issues:

1. Is the inclusion and equality of women in Judaism complete today?
2. Should gays be extended all religious rights in Judaism, such as marriage?
3. Are illegal immigrants the equivalent of the biblical “stranger” and justified in receiving a path to full citizenship?

Chapter IV- David and Nathan

The Text (II Samuel 11-12)

1. Should David have been allowed to remain king?
2. Does the punishment fit the crime?
3. Does David repent?

Contemporary Issues

1. What examples of prophetic figures speaking “truth to power” exist today?
2. Does this story have parallels to the impeachments of Nixon and Clinton?
3. Should immoral orders from superiors be refused?

Chapter V: Ben Zakkai and the Zealots

The text (Gittin 56a-b, Avot d’Rabbi Natan 4:5)

1. Was accommodation or resistance to Rome in the national interest?
2. Does anything justify Abba Sikra’s actions against his fellow citizens?
3. Is there a middle ground between pacifism and armed resistance?

Contemporary issues

1. Should Masada be a symbol of heroism today?
2. Should the United States support armed resistance against dictators?
3. Should Israel negotiate with sworn terrorist organizations?

Chapter VI: Hillel and Shammai

The text (Shabbat 21b, 31a, Ketubot 16b)

1. Is Shammai’s attitude toward a prospective convert understandable?
2. Should a bride be flattered even if involves a white lie?
3. Doesn’t it make more sense to light the Hanukah candles Shammai’s way?

Contemporary issues

1. Should a greater effort be made to welcome intermarried couples into Jewish life?
2. Should the Jewish community make a greater effort to gain converts?
3. Should a qualified judge be denied a nomination based on judicial philosophy?

Chapter VII: The Vilna Gaon and the Baal Shem Tov

The text (various attributed quotes)

1. Is prayer or study the primary means of relating to God?
2. Does excessive celebration lead people away from Torah?
3. Is “every spoken word” a message from God?

Contemporary issues

1. Should Jewish prayer today be traditional or innovative?
2. Should it include chanting, meditation, folk singing, dancing?
3. What is the most appropriate metaphor for God: parent or ruler?

Chapter VIII: Spinoza and the Amsterdam Rabbis

The text (Writ of Excommunication and Spinoza writings)

1. What, exactly, are Spinoza’s “evil opinions and abominable heresies”?
2. Are they worthy of excommunication?
3. Is Spinoza an atheist?

Contemporary issues

1. Should Judaism today be based on reason or revelation?
2. Should the humanistic congregation have been admitted to the Reform movement?
3. Should Brother Daniel have been given citizenship under the Law of Return?

Chapter IX: Geiger and Hirsch and Frankel

The text (rabbis’ sermons, books and conference transcripts)

1. Can the laws of the Torah be changed with the times?
2. Should Jewish prayer be all or part in Hebrew or the vernacular?
3. Should the Torah be subject to modern historical analysis?

Contemporary issues

1. Is patrilineal descent (Judaism determined through the father) legitimate?
2. Should kashrut be eliminated, or modified to be more ethically responsible?
3. Is a civil divorce sufficient for a Jewish couple?

Chapter X: Herzl and Wise

The text (Herzl diary and speeches; Wise address to the CCAR)

1. Are the Jewish people a faith community or an ethnic group?
2. Is a Jewish homeland the only real answer to anti-Semitism?
3. Why was Wise so vehement in his opposition to Zionism?

Contemporary issues

1. Can Jewish life flourish again in Germany and the former Soviet Union?
2. Should all Jews be Zionist in the sense of supporting Israel?
3. Do Jews outside Israel have a right to criticize the government of Israel?

THE ART OF DEBATE: TEN EASY STEPS

1. Study the issue
2. Craft a resolution
3. Divide into teams
4. Appoint captain and speakers
5. Outline your case
6. Opening statements
7. Cross Examination
8. Rebuttal/Summary
9. Judge's Review
10. Student Review

A classroom debate begins by studying the issue at hand. Read and discuss the chapter and examine the questions for reflection and debate that accompany each issue.

Choose one question and craft a resolution, *Resolved that....* in the form of a positive statement.

Divide into two teams, affirmative (for) and negative (against). Appointments should be made by the teacher and not based on personal views of the issue. The group should then appoint a captain and divide speaking responsibilities. Utilize index cards to then outline your case.

Opening arguments should begin with the affirmative team, then the negative. Cross examination, with a specified number of questions or time limit, should reverse the order. Closing arguments return to the original order. Make sure to listen carefully, take notes throughout, and shake hands at the end!

The teacher (judge) should score the debate as it unfolds and then offer a review and verdict. Students then are asked to review their own performance, that of the team, and ultimately their personal view of the subject and if it has evolved during the debate. Concluding remarks may then be offered by the teacher.