View PDF



Rabbi Charles E. Savenor serves as the Executive Director of Civic Spirit, a nonpartisan organization that provides training and resources to faith-based schools across the United States. This article appears in issue 43 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Introduction: "What Is This?"

The Exodus from Egypt represents a cornerstone event for the Jewish people. While mentioned daily in the liturgy, the story is told anew each year at the Passover seder with rituals commemorating as much the miracles and plagues as the hardships and triumphs. The scripted gestures during this feast of freedom are not virtue signaling about the holiday of the month, but rather an opportunity to internalize the values of freedom, justice, and responsibility.

The Torah understands the power of the story in real time and anticipates that future generations will have questions. Exodus 13:14 reads: "And it shall be when your child will ask you at some future time, 'What is this?'" One would be hard-pressed to find a more seemingly straightforward inquiry packed with layers of meaning. Is this child asking about the Jewish people's experiences as slaves, God's miracles that redeemed us, or, perhaps, what relevance these historical events hold for us today? Whatever the intention, this inquiry attributed today to the "simple child" is anything but simple.

It is not hard to imagine American children today observing the state of our democracy and asking the same question, "What is this?" Like their biblical counterparts, this question would be as much about the past as the future. In our intensely polarized country, the next generation would be justified in asking about the underpinnings of society, the aspirations of our founders, and the possibilities of building bridges over such wide divides.

The necessary steps to prepare the next generation to be engaged, informed, and optimistic citizens require a great deal more than liking a photo online or sharing the latest TikTok on one's social media page. Consistent with the theme of "Virtue without Signaling," this national enterprise cannot be a passing trend, but rather an evergreen subject.

In his book, *The Bill of Obligations*, Richard Haass highlights the risk of ignoring civics: "One major reason that American identity is fracturing is that we are failing to teach one another what it

means to be American.... It is thus essential that every American gets a grounding in civics—the country's political structures and traditions, along with what is owed to and expected of its citizens—starting in elementary school and continuing through college."

Failing Grades and a Troubling Picture

Civic education historically gave students the knowledge, skills, and sensibility to become informed and engaged citizens. In the 1950s, students spent five to six hours a week on civic education, learning how government works and the importance of civic participation. Civics started to decline in the 1970s, and only worsened in the 1990s.

Today, students rarely learn about fundamental democratic principles, nor are they equipped to discuss the benefits and challenges of a policy proposal. While both political parties view civic education as a strategy for strengthening "American identity," debates over the content of civic education are a partisan battleground. Pressure falls on school administrators and teachers to navigate difficult topics without the opportunity to attain mastery in how to bring students into the complex story of their country.

According to 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 22 percent of 8th grade students displayed proficiency in civics, with only 13 percent displaying proficiency in U.S. History. "The Nation's Report Card" also documented a "significant decrease" across all levels of performance except for the "very top-performing students" at the 90th percentile. These scores are the lowest since this research began in 1998.

If the decrease in content knowledge wasn't troubling enough, public trust in government has steadily declined since the 1960s. According to the Pew Research Center, only 2 in 10 Americans trust our government to do what is right for the public good. Expressing a growing sense of hopelessness, nearly half of American young adults (46%) are less trusting of governmental institutions—including Congress and the Supreme Court—than previous generations.

In our age of intense political polarization, we have also witnessed a dramatic rise in antisemitism and hate crimes. The ADL reported last year a 36 percent increase in antisemitic acts, many of them transpiring at schools. Since the war in Israel broke out on October 7th, the number of incidents has risen dramatically.

The data present a troubling picture of American education today. A majority of American students do not have a working knowledge of civics and how the government works. Without this background, we should not be surprised that young adults do not feel empowered to make a difference in society through civic engagement.

Cultivating Civic Spirit

Civic Spirit was founded seven years ago to address these very issues. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, Rabbi Robert S. Hirt and Virginia Bayer were concerned with the state of civil discourse in the United States. They convened conversations with educators, clergy, elected officials, and philanthropists to discuss how to address this situation. They discovered that civic education has been largely ignored since the end of the Cold War. This vital subject matter has been shoehorned into American History, glossed over, or ignored altogether for over a generation. Our two founders partnered with Dr. Tamara Mann Tweel, whose research uncovered that there was a significant need for teacher professional training and in-depth learning on civics education, to create an organization whose name bespeaks its aspirations: Civic Spirit.

While civic education has been minimized in public schools, they also found that there is no formal requirement to implement any civic education curriculum in Jewish Day Schools and their faith-based counterparts. In recent years, large and small organizations have joined the movement to ignite civics education. Of the millions of dollars spent on changing legislation and creating civics curriculum, none of these efforts other than Civic Spirit focus specifically on the needs and merits of faith communities and the rapidly expanding faith-based schools, where over four million students in the U.S. attend, even more than those enrolled in charter schools. Focusing on this niche, Civic Spirit embraced the opportunity to make a positive and noticeable impact on American society.

A Three-Pronged Approach

Civic Spirit promotes and provides training in civic education to Day Schools. Our work aims to enhance civic belonging, knowledge, and responsibility in their student and faculty communities. We believe in a multidisciplinary, nonpartisan approach to fostering informed and adept members of American society.

Faith communities' adherence to ritual and text study is an asset and catalyst for civic learning. We also leverage the highest values of each faith tradition to encourage civic responsibility and the virtues of respect, curiosity, humility, *hessed*, and justice.

Faith also provides an important window into understanding America's founding generation. While not all the founders were religious people, faith deeply informed their outlook and aspirations about what they hoped to achieve in this new country across the Atlantic, what Washington called "the great experiment." In addition, the Hebrew Bible, one of the most read and quoted books in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was part of the cultural conversation and occupied an honored place on contemporary bookshelves next to Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu.

Over the past six years working with Jewish and Christian schools from varied demographic communities, we have identified three core pillars for designing long-lasting, effective, and meaningful civic learning:

- democratic fluency
- civic skills
- civic belonging

These areas not only constitute our educational philosophy, but also reflect the soul of our mission. Other civics organizations focus on one or two of these, but we believe that the synergy between these three creates comprehensive civic education that is as grounded as it is uplifting.

Democratic Fluency

Telling America's story is challenging today. History teachers across the United States report feeling micromanaged, criticized, and on the defensive—so much so that thousands have left the field altogether over the last few years.

Sensitive to the support teachers need to succeed, Civic Spirit's emphasis on reading primary sources changes the dynamic in the classroom. By focusing on founding and foundational documents, teachers can let the texts speak for themselves. Further, rather than reading about our democracy's key texts, students can immerse themselves in the material, wrestle with their meaning, and arrive at their own conclusions. Our approach in anchored in the belief that knowledge of America's intellectual and political traditions prepares students for a self-governing society.

When I worked in a synagogue setting as a Jewish educator, it was not uncommon for children to ask me: "Didn't we learn this before?" This delicious question has been applied to everything from Passover to Bible stories and everything in between. The simple answer, quite frankly, is "yes." But the truth is that material covered in any grade is meant to be revisited and reexamined at a later time. At every stage of their educational journey students will participate in what's technically called a "spiral curriculum." We need to look no further than our weekly Torah reading ritual to see this value in action. In essence, *Keriat HaTorah* (Torah reading) is akin to a book club that reads the same text every year.

Judaism has this educational approach built into its DNA. Effective civic education requires the same intentionality, where students intersect with key sources throughout their education. More than just reinforcing the basics, this educational approach provides opportunities for students to see texts in a new light and embrace their responsibilities that flow from them.

Civic Skills

In an age when students communicate screen to screen, face-to-face communication is a skill set that needs to be developed, nurtured, and strengthened. Students today have difficulty with conflict. Like an app on their smartphone, it is easier to disengage than to lean in and listen with genuine curiosity. In addition to teaching about the importance of serving on a jury and voting, Civic Spirit invests in civic skills by providing training in civil discourse, media literacy, and collaboration across differences.

We operate with the expectation that there will be differences of opinion, and these differences should be embraced. This approach is informed by the traditional *havruta* model: learning in pairs. Highlighting the value of this type of learning, the Talmud asserts: "Two scholars sharpen one another" (*Taanit* 7a). Judaism holds that students in dialogue and debate can elevate each other's thinking about the material, and, one might argue, their community.

Too often today, conversation feels like debate, and at times, even worse, like a winner-takes-all gladiator sport. In *Talking to Strangers*, Danielle S. Allen writes: "Distrust can be overcome only when citizens manage to find methods of generating mutual benefit despite differences of position, experience, and perspective. The discovery of such methods is the central project of democracy."

Civic Spirit prepares the next generation to participate in and lead our democracy, and listening represents a vital civic skill. We provide training for teachers and students in structured dialogue about texts and ideas, intentional listening, and guided conversations, so the students learn how to talk with one another and to transform hesitation into understanding, difference into connection, and strangers into friends.

Civic Belonging

Our Educators Cohort year-long fellowship program opens with the question: "What experience shaped your American identity?" Each time we pose this question, the responses touch upon consistent themes. Fellows speak about going into the ballot box with their parents, visits to historical sites, and experiences abroad that generated their first opportunities to reflect upon America from afar. Group members also mention iconic events—the pandemic, 9/11, the Bicentennial, etc.—and how they impacted on their lives. Memories intermixed with inspiration, questions, and aspirations.

These fellows represent schools of different faith traditions, hail from all over the United States, and include newcomers to the field along with their veteran peers. And yet, every time we open our training, what impresses me most are the commonalities. Similar challenges motivate them to join the fellowship, including teaching America's story during a time of intense political polarization and a societal preference of scattered soundbites over ongoing conversations of consequence. More importantly, their conviction that civic education can enable us to overcome contemporary issues and inspire students to develop strong American identities never fails to energize the room.

Civic Belonging emanates from the successful implementation of our first two pillars. At the same time, this feeling that "I belong to America" and that "America belongs to me" can be developed

independently when students feel a social and emotional connection to their school, city, state, and country. We believe that this emotional connection to community and country is the first step toward civic faith and responsibility.

I mentioned before that Civic Spirit, while informed by Jewish values, is a multifaith organization. Multifaith describes the composition of our participants, not the content we discuss. The wisdom of this model is the realization that, frankly, one community cannot change the world on its own. Strengthening American democracy can only be achieved with a wide coalition and through collaboration across differences.

In an age of intense political divisions and polarization, it can be easy to yearn for simpler times and even the "good old days." Our ancestors also faced their own challenges and wrestled with differences that may have felt like obstacles to the future.

One such example unfolded on the very first day of Continental Congress in Philadelphia in September 1774. When one of the delegates suggested that the session begin with a prayer, there was a great deal of pushback, for the group represented a variety of religious beliefs ranging from Anabaptists to Quakers.

Seeking to bridge the divide, Samuel Adams convinced his peers to move forward by asserting "that he was no bigot, and could hear a Prayer from any gentleman of Piety and virtue who was at the same time a friend to his Country."

The very next morning on September 7, 1774, the assembly opened with Reverend Jacob Duche offering several prayers. Remembered most vividly was his reading of the first three verses of Psalm 35, which states: "Of David. O Lord, strive with my adversaries, give battle to my foes. Take up shield and armor, and come to my defense. Ready the spear and javelin against my pursuers; say to my spirit, 'I am your deliverance.'"

John Adams described the response to this prayer in a letter to his wife Abigail: "I must confess I never heard a better prayer....with such fervor, such ardor, such earnestness and pathos, and in language so elegant and sublime for American [and] for the Congress.... It has had an excellent effect upon everybody here."

There are several theories why Psalm 35 resonated so deeply with the members of the Continental Congress that day. One asserts that the founders were inspired by the identification of America with the biblical David fighting victoriously against England representing the giant Goliath. Another opinion is that the belief that the Almighty supports moral causes affirmed the delegates' intentions.

I suggest that inspiration emanated from finding a way forward. What began as a cacophonous debate transformed into a harmonious moment generating civic spirit to embrace common purpose.

Strengthening Democracy

In 1776, when America's founders were imagining the great seal of this new democracy, several suggested a depiction of the Exodus from Egypt. The Israelites' overcoming oppression and reaching freedom captured their imagination, as they saw themselves in this biblical triumphant story.

More than our back story, the Exodus story promotes the very best of Jewish values. What makes Passover special is not just the telling of the story, but the internalization of its messages through study, rituals, questions, and conversation. Further, the celebration of Passover is certainly elevated by the storytellers as much as the story.

Nearly 250 years later, at a time when democracy is challenged near and far, our role as educators and storytellers is more important than ever. This moment of American history inspires and animates the work of Civic Spirit with urgency. Our mission is grounded in the belief that our approach to civic education and investment of hope, love, and energy will yield the next generation of engaged citizens and civic leaders who will overcome their differences and chart a course for our country with common cause. A commitment to liberty, democracy, and freedom is a legacy we can be proud to pass onto our children. During these divisive times, these civic virtues serve as a North Star to a stronger future.