



Good Schools
Pennsylvania

Every Kid Counts.

Jewish Sermon Suggestions

1. Tzedaka: Justice and Righteousness

"Tzedek, tzedek you shall pursue," instructs the Torah (Deuteronomy 16:20). Hundreds of years later, the Talmud taught: "Tzedaka is equal to all the other commandments combined." (Bava Bathra 9b) Translated literally from the Hebrew, tzedaka means justice or righteousness.

Today, in 21st century America, Jews are mostly isolated from the poor and needy among us. We may feel that we can satisfy our obligation of tzedaka by making financial contribution to the local Jewish Federation or United Way. Sometimes, however, an injustice cannot be corrected merely by the giving of money. Sometimes it is necessary for people to become personally involved and raise their voices to speak out against injustice.

The inequity of school funding in Pennsylvania is just such a case. We all know that education is the key to success in 21st century America. It is clear that too many children in Pennsylvania are not getting a fair chance at a good education. By getting involved in this campaign; by learning about the injustice of school funding and telling others about it; Jewish Americans in Pennsylvania will be doing tzedaka for the children of Pennsylvania.

2. The Legacy of Jewish Activists

Jews have been participating in social and political activism for a long time from Judah Maccabee and Bar Kochba in the hills of Judea to Mordecai Anielewicz in the Warsaw Ghetto. In American history, Jews have been social activists far out of proportion to their general representation in the population in the areas of labor, civil rights, child welfare, women's rights and all of the peace movements of the 20th century. Their names include Louis Brandeis, Albert Einstein, Lillian Wald and Henrietta Szold.

In Pennsylvania we cavalierly fail more than half the children by not ensuring that they receive an education that is fair and equitable compared to the education received by other children in Pennsylvania. In the best spirit and tradition of our distinguished forebearers who fought for justice, may you rise up and speak out on this important issue of a fair and adequate education for every child in Pennsylvania.

3. A Mitzvah of the Highest Order

"He who teaches a child is as if he had created it."

Sanhedrin 19b

"She who teaches the son of an unlearned woman can make void a decree, even if it comes from God."

Baba Metzia 85

"One of God's angels stands over every blade of grass whispering 'grow, grow.'"
Bereishit Rabbah 9:6

These quotations from the Talmud make clear that Jewish philosophy holds education in the highest regard. The quotations also make clear that education of the children of the poor is also a mitzvah of the highest order and that each and every child counts. There are dramatic and unacceptable inequities in funding among Pennsylvania schools. We have the opportunity to perform a "mitzvah of the highest order" by taking the time to inform ourselves and speak out in favor of a fair and equitable education for every child in Pennsylvania. Only then will each one have a fair chance to "grow, grow."

4. "...You shall Neither Side with the Mighty to do Wrong"

Public education is in a state of crisis in many parts of the United States. Almost all states are struggling with standards, accountability and appropriate methods of assessment. Several states have already made progress on the issue of equitable funding for all students which can serve as useful lessons for Pennsylvania as we grapple with the same problem. Given the complexity of the problems facing public education especially for poor children, it is tempting to focus our work close to home to ensure that our own children have good teachers, small classes, up-to-date textbooks and adequate technology. But this is not an adequate answer. The Torah makes clear that we are not to choose the easy path that serves only our own self interest especially where the poor are concerned.

"You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. . . . You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong."
Exodus 22:20-21; 23-2.

5. Peretz' Egg: A Solution Cannot Wait

The writer I.L. Peretz once wrote a story about a farmer whose chicken laid an egg on the Sabbath. The farmer went to the rabbi to find out whether it was permissible to eat the egg. The rabbi told him to come back the next day for the answer. The next day, when he returned, the rabbi told him he wasn't sure, that he still had to check some sources, to come back in two days. Then in two days, the rabbi told the farmer that he needed to check with a colleague. And so it went until finally the answer didn't matter anymore. The egg was rotten. We are faced with the same dilemma as the farmer. For too many years the Pennsylvania legislature has failed to answer the question of how to provide equity in school funding and how to provide quality schools in Pennsylvania. And while they, like Peretz's rabbi, search for the right answers, the children of Pennsylvania end up with a rotten egg.

6. The Importance of Righteous Action

*Even if you offer me burnt and grain offerings, I will not be satisfied;
I will not look with favor on the fattened calves you offer in peace.
Take away from me your noisy songs;
I don't want to hear the music of your stringed instruments.
Let justice well up as waters,
and righteousness as a mighty stream.*
Amos 5: 22-24

This quotation from the Prophet Amos is about what works. Amos tells us that God won't be placated with sacrifices and empty prayer. Nor will God be satisfied with the easy-to-provide offerings of grain or insincere songs and flattery. It will take sincerity in prayer and manner of living as well as righteous action. These efforts are much harder to marshal than "fatted calves" and "noisy songs."

Similarly, we know what works in improving education. We know how much money we should spend, we know what standards to implement and what remedies to offer. What we need to muster is the will to do the appropriate thing; in the legislature, in the governor's office and in each and every school in the Commonwealth.

7. "Open your Hand to the Poor"

Justice delayed is justice denied. This is particularly true for children where their education is concerned. We know that in the early years of childhood, the foundation is laid for their future educational success. Pre-school, full-day kindergarten and small class sizes are critical to providing the best opportunity for learning in the kindergarten through third grade. All children need quality teachers, up-to-date curriculum, technology and textbooks.

Children cannot be advocates for themselves. They must rely on the larger society to provide what is best for them. It is up to us to be their advocates. The Torah urges us to shoulder this responsibility.

"If, however, there is a needy person among you, . . . do not harden your heart and shut your hand against [him]. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. . . . Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the Lord your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land."

Deuteronomy 15:7-11.

8. Ashamnu: The Importance of Accountability

Ashamnu ("We have sinned") is one of the communal confessionals recited on the night of Yom Kippur and on Yom Kippur day. Together we stand, beat our breasts and speak out loud an acrostic of communal sins. The liturgy exhorts us to understand and confess our personal sins to God in our private prayers. We pray throughout the Days of Awe to be written in the Book of Life and by the end of Yom Kippur, the gates are closing.

Our rituals and prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are symbolic of the accountability that we as Jews owe to God and to each other. Standards and accountability appear frequently in the Torah and the Talmud and consequently are a major theme in Jewish life. Similarly, there should be standards and accountability in other important areas of our lives.

We call upon ourselves to be accountable to God and each other for the ways in which we use our talents and resources. We should also call on those who are entrusted with the education of children to be accountable for the careful and effective use of their resources and for an appropriate level of success in their undertaking.

9. The Mitzvah of Teaching all Children, Rich and Poor

When we look at the long arc of human history, we admire and praise those who saw beyond the conditions of their own times and fought against injustice, especially when speaking out or fighting oppression was at great risk to their own comfort or even their lives. We honor those who acted to free us from slavery and oppression, those who opposed threats, hatred and violence to our lives, families and communities. We remember also those who struggled against the oppression of others; for the civil rights of African Americans, to abolish child labor, reform mental health care, advance the rights of women.

It is difficult work to bring about social change. Few of us are willing to take on the challenges and effort of changing the status quo. When we get tired of the effort and feel as if we will never be successful in our campaign for quality education for all children in Pennsylvania, we can refresh ourselves with the words of a simple teacher quoted in the Talmud:

In Rav's days, there was a teacher whose prayer for rain was answered promptly. Asked to tell of his special merit, he said: "I teach children of the poor as well as of the rich; I accept no fee from any who cannot afford it and I have a fishpond to delight the children and to encourage them to do their lessons."

Ta'anit 24a