

Reclaiming Safety Shavuot Study Guide

Shavuot is a Biblical harvest festival celebrating the ripening of the first fruits. Jews also celebrate Shavuot as the holiday of receiving Torah on Mt. Sinai, and mark the occasion by engaging in all night communal learning. Last spring, JVP launched the Deadly Exchange Campaign, working to stop police exchanges between the U.S. and Israel. In this season, we focus our communal learning to educate ourselves and our communities about how police exchanges work, understanding what our role in organizing against them will be, and investigating and imagining what real safety could look like. JVP Rabbinical Council offers this Shavuot learning inspired by the Deadly Exchange campaign, centered on campaign materials and Jewish texts that help us raise questions and deepen our understanding of policing and safety.

What is the Deadly Exchange Campaign?

One of the most dangerous places where the regimes of Trump and Netanyahu converge are in exchange programs that bring together police, ICE, border patrol, and FBI from the US with soldiers, police, border agents, etc from Israel. In these programs, “worst practices” are shared to promote and extend discriminatory and repressive policing in both countries including extrajudicial executions, shoot-to-kill policies, police murders, racial profiling, massive spying and surveillance, deportation and detention, and attacks on human rights defenders.

Thousands of the highest ranking police officials and law enforcement executives across the country have participated in the exchange programs, which are primarily billed as opportunities for U.S. law enforcement to learn counterterrorism tactics from the Israeli military and police.

We believe civil rights organizations and Jewish communal institutions have no business participating in further endangering those in Trump and Bibi’s crosshairs by dispatching police, ICE and FBI agents to trade tips with an occupying army. We also believe so called progressive cities must end their participation in these programs.

Why Reclaiming Safety?

The deadly falsehood that violence against some communities will create security for others is perpetuated by the policies of both the U.S. and Israeli government. These exchanges perpetuate the falsehood that increasingly militarized police brings safety and security to people and communities. This makes “safety” and “security” at best meaningless buzzwords, and at worst, for black and brown, Muslim and Arab, poor, immigrant, queer and trans communities targeted by these oppressive policies and tactics, linked to systemic violence and harm.

From the US to Israel, we know that the path to safety for all is in building joint struggles for justice and showing up to protect and defend one another. This is the exchange—between people’s movements rather than policing—that we must grow. As a Jewish organization dedicated to safety and justice for all peoples, we see it as our duty to not only draw the line at these exchanges, but also reclaim safety. We are building a vision and practice of collective

safety that recognizes the historical and contemporary harm perpetrated by police against black, brown, Indigenous, poor people, opposes state violence and incarceration. We want to join in efforts to expand the definition of sanctuary to mean that all people targeted by aggressive policing—including immigrants and refugees, as well as all people of color, Muslims, trans and queer people—are safe to live their lives. We ask, what would it look like for communities to address harm in ways that don't perpetuate devastation and loss? What would real safety look like?

What is Shavuot?

Shavuot (literally, 'weeks') was originally an agricultural holiday, celebrating the new season by bringing first fruits as offerings. In the Torah, we read:

You will count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you will observe the Feast of Weeks for the Source your God, offering your freewill contribution according as the Source your God has blessed you. (Devarim 16:9-10)

The rabbis of the Talmud layered meaning on top of the festival, proclaiming:

Rabbi Elazar said: All agree with regard to *Atzeret*, the holiday of *Shavuot*, that we require that it be also "for you," meaning that it is a mitzva to eat, drink, and rejoice on that day. What is the reason? It is the day on which the Torah was given. (Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 68b)

Pesach and Shavuot are linked in our calendar, both in the harvest cycle and in our origin story: On Pesach we were physically freed from slavery, on Shavuot we are given Torah: wisdom, history, ways of being in community together, and divine inspiration.

Observing Shavuot and Hosting a Study Session

As this festival celebrates Torah, the custom developed to spend time studying together as a community on Shavuot, sometimes all night long, a *tikkun leil Shavuot*. Use these materials on their own, or alongside teach-in materials about the campaign. For many reasons, it is a tradition to eat dairy treats on Shavuot, so break out a cheese plate and some Lactase.

Outline and Materials

Welcome, Introduction & Blessings

Welcome participants to the event, give a chance for people to connect with each other, and whatever introduction to the basic premise of the campaign and Shavuot that you think your audience needs.

We will be diving into Jewish texts to address challenging questions that this campaign raises up. Within our thousands of years of textual history, we have a wide range of opinions on every topic, and no authoritative, correct position to point to as the "right" Jewish answer. The harder the question, the more answers there will be. So tonight we will look at a selection of texts that we want to be in conversation with, that we don't agree with all of and that don't

agree with each other. We will try to understand why they might be saying what they are saying, and ask, “What *torah* (wisdom) is in this *Torah* (text)?”

Choose one of the three topic sections below, read each text out loud in pairs, and talk through what is happening to make sure everyone has some understanding about what each text is conveying. Then, take on these discussion questions, in pairs, small groups, or as a big group. Feel free to just use one of the sections, go through multiple sections, as time allows, or pick the texts that most excite you and you think will speak to your group.

The blessing for Torah study does not say that we have to agree with or like everything that we study, but gives honor to the work of digging into material that has been passed down for generation upon generation. Together we say:

ברכת לימוד תורה

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוֵּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה:

Baruh atah adonay eloheynu meleh ha'olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu la'asok bedivrey torah.

Blessed are you, Divine Source, the spirit of all worlds, who made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us to occupy ourselves with words of Torah.

For another blessing option, we can read together:

“**Gatherings**” Elliott batTzedek

Gather your strengths
and gather your failures
Gather your kin
and gather your strangers
Gather what you love
and what you fear
Gather what you have lost
and what you have yet to find
Find the courage to proclaim
“All we gather is sacred”

Policing & Military: Making War in Our Tradition

Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) conveys mixed messages about war: at some moments in the text, military might is construed as a demonstration of the Israelite people's power and Divine connection. At other moments, war making is maligned as corrupt and degrading to the collective. How do we understand this multivocal tradition, and what do we do with contradictory or upsetting texts that we've inherited?

Deuteronomy 7:1-2

(1) When the LORD your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter to possess, and He dislodges many nations before you, the Hittite, and the Girgashite, and the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite, seven nations much larger than you; (2) and the LORD your God delivers them to you, and you defeat them; you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter.

Hosea 10:13

Because you have trusted in your chariots and in the multitude of your warriors, The tumult of war shall arise among your people and all your fortresses shall be destroyed.

I Chronicles 22:8

(8) But the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and fought great battles; you shall not build a House for My name, for you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight.

Discussion Questions

1. What might it mean to "grant them no terms?" (in Deuteronomy) and "trust in your chariots" (in Hosea)? What does it mean to "build a House for My Name" (in I Chronicles)? What are contemporary parallels of these ideas, that resonate in your understanding of the world?
2. What do each of these texts suggest about the rightness of making war? Do the texts say anything about when to fight, and when not?
3. In "Judaism on Violence and Reconciliation: An Examination of Key Sources," Reuven Firestone writes:

Historically the Hebrew Bible emerged out of a real-life environment in which there was no universal legal system for arbitrating disputes and aggression. Violence between peoples was a common and normal fact of life. All the evidence suggests that at least at certain times, the biblical people of Israel had to fight, perhaps even to the death, simply in order to survive as a distinct religious community. Fighting is therefore required at times in the Hebrew Bible because the alternative was perceived as destruction and therefore the inability to carry out the divine will.

Does this historical background effect how you read or understand the texts?

4. One of the foundations of the Deadly Exchange campaign is that militarizing the police increases the already toxic violence of the police. Could you use any of these texts to explain that idea?

Ending War and Pursuing Peace

Our tradition includes many texts about the importance and sacredness of making peace. What does that look like, and what are our responsibilities in working for it?

Micah 4:3-5

(3) And God will judge among the many peoples, And arbitrate for the multitude of nations, however distant; And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruninghooks; Nation shall not take up sword against nation, they shall never again learn war.

(4) But every man shall sit every man under his grape vine and fig-tree; And none will make them afraid; For it was the LORD of hosts who spoke. (5) For let all the peoples walk each one in the name of its gods, We will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.

Psalms 34:15 Depart from evil, and do good; Seek peace, and pursue it.

Jerusalem Talmud, Pe'ah 1:1 [4a]

The Law does not order you to run after or pursue the other commandments, but only to fulfill them on the appropriate occasion. But peace you must seek in your place and pursue it even to another place as well.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you understand Micah's vision of a peaceful world? What does each man sitting under his own vine and fig tree mean to you? Is his vision of "all the peoples walk each one in the name of its gods" liberatory, exclusionary, both, neither? Does it resonate with your vision of just peace in the world?
2. What is the difference between departing from evil and doing good? Why are they two separate tasks?
3. Why would seeking peace be an exception to the law about running after the commandments? What does this look like in your life?

Safety & Security

The Deadly Exchange Campaign challenges the idea that safety and security come from increasing military might and police power. Now we will look at Jewish texts that ask for safety and security, and interrogate where and how that is found.

Psalm 121:

A song for ascents: I lift my eyes to the mountains. From where will my help come? My help comes from YHWH, Maker of the heavens and the earth. He does not allow your foot to stumble. Your guardian does not sleep. Behold He does not sleep and He does not slumber, He is the Guardian of Israel. YHWH is your Guardian. YHWH is your shade. He is at your right hand. By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night. YHWH will guard you from all harm. He will guard your life. He will guard you in your coming and your going, from now until forever.

Hashkiveinu

Lie us down to peace, Adonai our God, and raise us up to life, our king (protector) , and spread over us the shelter of your peace, and direct us with good advice before You, and save us for the sake of your name, and look out for us, and keep enemies, plagues swords, famines, and troubles from our midst, and remove Satan from in front of us and from behind us, and cradle us in the shadow of your wings, for You are God who guards us and saves us, for You are God. Our gracious and merciful king (protector). Guard our departure and our arrival to life and to peace, from now and ever more.

(On Weekdays) Blessed are You, Adonai, who guards his People Yisrael forever.

(On Shabbat) And spread over us the shelter of your peace. Blessed are You, Adonai, who spreads a shelter of peace over us, over all of His People Yisrael, and over Jerusalem.

Discussion questions

1. This psalm and prayer give voice to requests for safety and security. What elements to these texts say make people safe? What does safety look like in these texts? Does this resonate with what helps you to feel safe? Why or why not?
2. Most traditional liturgy assumes that protection and safety are Divine blessings, gifts from God. Where do you turn for protection and safety? What tone do these texts take to ask for protection? Does this resonate with your experience of asking for protection?
3. Compose your own request for protection. What are you asking for? Who are you addressing?

Next Steps: Getting involved in the campaign

This June will be an important movement-wide marking of 50 years since the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. Please check out the US Campaign for Palestinian Rights call for a week of action [here](#), and be looking for ways to show up and help plan local actions in your community or region.

As we protest ongoing Israeli occupation and apartheid, June will also be a time of escalation for the Deadly Exchange campaign! The month will kick off with a New York City mobilization in early June, with participation & support from across the region to really introduce the campaign. If you're an east coast chapter leader or interested in coming to New York to be a part of this big and exciting moment, reach out to AKK (alana@jvp.org) to discuss!

Building off the momentum from the NYC mobilization, we're excited to move forward the campaign organization-wide throughout the rest of the month.

[Check out this toolkit](#) and work with your local chapter or community to plan one of the proposed actions this June! Action ideas include internal teach-ins, public-facing teach-ins, walking tours, or a public direct actions! If you're specifically interested in thinking through a powerful, creative direct action and want to bounce your ideas off of other chapter leaders for support, be in touch with Ilana Rossoff, ilana@jvp.org.