



Social Action

Lesson Plan

Introduction

In this lesson, students will learn about the importance of social action and will think creatively to promote causes for which they see a need to take action.

Learning Objectives

Students will understand the importance of not remaining silent in the face of suffering of others.

Materials

Excerpts from Eli Wiesel's "The Jews of Silence"

Background

Before the 1960s, the West was largely unaware of the extremity of the Jewish problem in the Soviet Union. At this point, Western communist parties began to send delegations to assess the situation and were shocked at what they found. They published their findings in various publications. In 1965, Elie Wiesel was sent to the Soviet Union by Ha'aretz to report on the lives of the Jews there and, in 1966, he published "The Jews of Silence", his eyewitness account of what he saw there. His book was a wake-up call to action, directed at world Jewry whose silence regarding Russian Jews was deafening, and greatly helped raise public awareness for the cause. Jews around the world began rallying, lobbying, and doing everything they could to release the Jews from the Soviet Union. These efforts helped lead to the eventual falling of the Iron Curtain and mass emigration of Jews from the Union.



Procedure

1. Read the very important and powerful excerpts from Elie Wiesel's book (below) with the class.
2. Discuss his claim that "The Jewish brain has killed the Jewish heart"
 - What causes (Jewish and not) exist today to which we are silent?
 - What excuses do we tell ourselves in order to justify our inaction?
 - Was there ever a time when you were able to overcome this voice, and did something that made a difference (to an individual or a group)?

3. Read and discuss the following quote where Natan Sharansky describes his efforts to help groups outside the Jewish community, and the fact that he felt that this could only be possible after having first understood and committed himself to his own Jewish identity.

"Fear No Evil" P. xxi – "While my own focus was of Jewish emigration, I was also active on behalf of people from many national and religious groups whose rights were brutally violated by the Soviet regime, including Pentecostals and Catholics, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tatars. The Helsinki Watch Group also produced documents about human rights violations in Soviet prisons, labor camps, and psychiatric hospitals. My interest in helping other persecuted peoples was an important part of my own freedom – a freedom that became real only after I returned to my Jewish roots. For activist Jews of my generation, our movement represented the exact opposite of what our parents had gone through when they were young. But we saw what had happened to their dreams, and we understood that the path to liberation could not be found in denying our own roots while pursuing universal goals. On the contrary: we had to deepen our commitment, because only he who understands his own identity and has already become a free person can work effectively for the human rights of others.

4. Highlight the rally in Washington, which was, held on December 6, 1987 - the largest rally in support of Soviet Jewry, on the day before Mikhail Gorbachev was to meet with U.S. president Ronald Reagan. More than 250,000 people attended this historic "Freedom Sunday" rally that sent waves throughout the world and helped the imminent lifting of the Iron Curtain. In 1986, without internet and social media, they were able to spread the word and mobilize a massive turnout for the rally. They did this by writing in local papers, creating a telephone hotline,



holding lectures, running educational programs, organizing transportation to Washington, and handing out pledge cards and pamphlets in local synagogues with slogans such as “Gorbachev is coming to Washington...are you?” Copies of these primary sources can be found at the following links:

- <https://www.scribd.com/document/113805605/A-Guide-to-Community-Mobilization-for-Soviet-Jewry>
- <https://www.scribd.com/document/113805604/The-Communities-Prepare-for-the-Summit>
- <https://www.scribd.com/document/113805593/Are-you-coming-to-Washington>

5. Divide students into groups and have them choose and research a current cause that requires social action. (An example of a Jewish cause similar to the cause of freedom for Soviet Jewry is that of Ethiopian Aliyah, see http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/photo-essay-the-jews-of-ethiopia-have-cried-out-who-will-listen/?utm_source=The+Times+of+Israel+Daily+Edition&utm_campaign=6262e24445-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_03_10&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_adb46cec92-6262e24445-54573153)

6. Have the students create a plan to raise awareness and implement it in your institution.