

Acting Justly: Preserving Human Dignity in Undignified Times  
Study Guide  
**KOACH Shabbat 2009**

Welcome to this year's **KOACH** Shabbat Study Guide! We are delighted that you are participating in this very exciting program, shared by dozens of campuses and hundreds of students across North America.

We're providing a variety of text resources this year, from a variety of sources. Particular thanks to the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, for the texts from their sourcebook *Walking with Justice*. These materials will provide more than enough food for thought for at least two study sessions. Feel free to pick and choose as you see fit. Recommendations below will provide guidelines on how to best use the materials relative to the time available.

In a spare moment while everyone is gathered, **please promote our annual gathering of college students, the 2010 KOACH Kallah**. This year's Kallah will take place at the Pearlstone Conference and Retreat Center in Reisterstown, MD, March 4-7. Scholar in residence Rabbi Leonard Gordon, rabbi of the Germantown Jewish Centre and co-chair of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Commission on Social Justice and Public Policy, will speak on *Setting the Agenda: Jews and Public Policy*.

Thank you again for your involvement with this project. If you have any questions, please be in touch with Rabbi Elyse Winick, Associate Director for **KOACH** at [winick@uscj.org](mailto:winick@uscj.org) or 857 231 3690; you'll receive an online evaluation shortly after **KOACH** Shabbat. Please help us out and complete it in a timely manner!

Shabbat Shalom!

If you are doing two sessions (read on for single session guidance).....

Allow an hour to an hour and a half per session.

#### Session One

1. Open with an icebreaker and/or introductions. (need icebreaker ideas? <http://wilderdom.com/games/Icebreakers.html>) Invite people to introduce themselves and tell about a random act of kindness they either witnessed or experienced in the past week. 10-15 minutes
2. Invite people to enter into a conversation about the ways in which they have seen the current economic challenges impact on their communities and people whom they know. What have been their sources of strength and comfort in these trying times? 10-15 minutes
3. Describe the concept of studying in *hevruta*, in pairs. This is the traditional method of encountering Jewish text, in conversation. One teacher once remarked that the library is the most anti-Semitic of Jewish institutions, because it requires quiet. The study of Jewish text is dependent on the interplay of past and present and the presence of the knowledge and life stories of the study partners. Make some noise! 5 minutes
4. The first set of texts focuses on the concept of human dignity. Begin with the two Biblical texts, from Genesis and Exodus. What does each tell us about the

- relationship of human beings to God? Do they tell us anything about how human beings might relate to one another? What are the commonalities between the two texts? More intriguing, what are the differences? 10-15 minutes
5. Texts 3-6 illustrate the rabbinic sensitivity to human dignity. Encourage the *hevrotot* to read all four. Select two for the focus of your discussion. What are the various ways in which the rabbis illustrate the importance of human dignity? What specific behaviors can we derive from these texts? Consider examples within your own family, among your friends, with strangers in your community, with Jews and others around the world. 10-15 minutes
  6. Text 7 is by Emmanuel Levinas (philosopher, 1906-1995, Lithuania/France). Use the Levinas text to reflect back on the Genesis and Exodus texts from the beginning of the session. Does this change our understanding of those texts? How might it transform how we interact with others? 10 minutes
  7. In conclusion: share this passage from Masekhet Sotah. See if the group can collectively come up with the stories which are the biblical citations – they're in bold so you don't read them before they have a chance to think of what they might be.

#### תלמוד בבלי, סוטה יד.

ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב (דברים יג) אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו? וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? והלא כבר נאמר (דברים ד) כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא! אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה, מה הוא מלביש ערומים, דכתיב (בראשית ג) ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם, אף אתה הלבש ערומים; הקב"ה ביקר חולים, דכתיב (בראשית יח) וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא, אף אתה בקר חולים; הקב"ה ניהם אבלים, דכתיב (בראשית כה) ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו, אף אתה נחם אבלים; הקב"ה קבר מתים, דכתיב (דברים לד) ויקבר אותו בגיא, אף אתה קבור מתים.

R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: What means the text: "You shall walk after God" (Deuteronomy 13)? Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after God; for has it not been said: "For God is a devouring fire" (Deuteronomy 4)? But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One. Just as God clothes the naked, as it says, "**And God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them**" (Genesis 3), so do you also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be God, visited the sick, for it is written: "**And God appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre**" (Genesis 18), so do you also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be God, comforted mourners, for it is written: "**And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son**" (Genesis 25), so do you also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be God, buried the dead, for it is written: "**And God buried him in the valley**" (Deuteronomy 34), so do you also bury the dead.

Conclude the conversation by thinking aloud together about the range of motivations (religious and otherwise) for preserving human dignity.

Session Two (you need to keep reading if you're only able to do one session!)

Allow an hour to an hour and a half

1. Introductions all around once more. Invite people to share thoughts from the previous session. Did they learn anything unexpected? Did they find texts to be compelling? Invite them to share examples in society of ways in which the quest for human dignity is ignored. 10 minutes

2. These texts focus on the practical implications of the quest for human dignity, specific ways in which we are meant to feel obligated to address social ills. There are four texts to choose from (8-11) on the main source sheet. Then, there are an additional five text sheets from *Walking with Justice*. Don't try to do them all!
3. Divide into *hevrotot* again and look at the first text sheet from *Walking with Justice*, from the Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* (Social Justice: An Introduction – Text 4). Discussion questions appear on the page. 10-15 minutes
4. For the eight remaining sources (four on the main sheet, four additional pages from *Walking with Justice*), divide them up among the group. Each *hevruta* will study its own sources and report back to the group. Remember to contextualize the discussion in terms of human dignity and the ways in which the texts call out to us to repair our world. Questions for each text appear on the source sheets themselves. Allow 10 minutes for study and then 20 minutes for group discussion.
5. In conclusion: *Pirkei Avot* (Chapters of the Fathers) teaches, *lo hamidrash ikar, elah ha-ma'aseh* – it's not the text that's central, but the action. Spend some time discussing the concrete actions you might take in response to these texts. Start small, but also think globally. Consider individual actions, but also projects you might take on as a community.

If you're only doing one session....

Allow an hour and a half and use the following elements from the two session model:

From Session One: 1, 3, 4, 6

From Session Two: 3, 4, 5

Conclude with 7 from Session One

Enjoy! Should you have any questions about this material, please contact Rabbi Elyse Winick, Associate Director for **KOACH** at [winick@uscj.org](mailto:winick@uscj.org).

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