Bruriah High School for Girls

ELIZABETH, NJ

MARGUEYA NOVICK, ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CHAIR AND TEACHER

Jewish American or American Jew: Where do I fit into the fabric of this country?

In my eleventh grade Advanced Placement Literature class, we have studied various works of American literature, discussing the American dream, identity, and government. Throughout the year, we have looked at various perspectives on what it means to be American - from Crevecoeur to the Puritans to F. Scott Fitzgerald. But as the year comes to a close, one voice remains unheard: that of the American Jew.

In this past year's presidential election, religious values and ideals came to the forefront in an even more dramatic way than it has in the past. Suddenly, fealty to Israel overtook almost any issue, and the election became deeply personal and urgent.

The recent protests on campus and rallies throughout America in favor of freeing Palestine called into question how safe and even welcome we are in America, as well as how much representation can we realistically expect from our government? Voting suddenly became a decisive and divisive issue of which country incited more of your concern, and what your vote represented.

In the shadows of that prolonged tension, I wanted to challenge my English students to ask themselves some difficult questions about their civic duty as well as their country's duty to them. My goals were to call out some of the quiet tensions surrounding our complex identities.

Our AP curriculum does not readily allow for these sorts of diversions, so I am eager to present this project after the exam, when we have a six week stretch with nothing specific to work on.

With my Civics Mentor, we put together the following general questions:

- What role does Civics play in my life?
- What is my responsibility as a Jewish American Citizen? What role do I play in society?
- Is it a contradiction to my Jewish identity to raise an American flag? Celebrate Independence Day?
- What does my country owe me? What do I owe my country?

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We then further broke these overarching ideas down to their particular groups:

1. **Dual Loyalties:** To what extent should my American identity inform my Jewish identity and vice versa? Where does my loyalty and love for Israel fit into my American identity?
2. **Separation of Church and State:** To what extent should Jewish customs and values inform American policy? Can protecting my religious rights infringe on the freedoms of my country and vice versa?
3. **Jewish Pride vs. Fitting in:** To what extent can/ should one be openly Jewish? Where in my American life might there be contradictions to my Jewish identity?
4. **College Campus & Academia:** Can a Zionism values system coexist within American academia? How does a university maintain a fair environment within a contested, religious issue?

Our assignment took on a creative framework, and we will ask the students to complete the following:

Congratulations! Your team has been selected to present to a national conference on the topic of "Making a Case for the Jewish Voice in America." Using slides, you will present relevant information regarding your topic such as Supreme Court cases, Rabbinical responses, news events, opinion pieces, and cultural examples. Your presentation's success lies in your persuasive skills, creativity, research, and professionalism. Your presentation will culminate in not only slides but leading a conversation with your audience.

Upon completing your deep dive into your topic, you will add a reflection:

- *What broad question does this topic raise?*
- *What conclusion have you drawn?*
- *What recommendation might you make?*
- *What other questions do you still have?*

It is my hope that the students will feel a renewed sense of pride and connection to their country, and an appreciation for the unique contribution they can make. I also hope they will feel more responsibility to their fellow citizens and a deeper understanding of how they can and should participate in their civic opportunities.