

# Flexing Ethical Muscles: Challenges of Jewish Sovereignty in Israel



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# Flexing Ethical Muscles:

## Challenges of Jewish Sovereignty in Israel

“Taking power and the costs of power... have become central concerns of the Jewish people... Ethical muscles not flexed for centuries are now used; sometimes they are stiff and sore...” - Rabbi I. Greenberg

This lesson explores the great responsibility that comes with being a Free People in Our Land. The lesson uses two legal judgments made by Israel's Supreme Court to expose the students to the complex nature of this responsibility.

### Goals:

- The students will appreciate the wonder of the modern State of Israel's sovereignty after two thousand years under foreign rule.
- The students will grasp the great complexity that Israeli decision-makers encounter when setting policy .
- The students will experience the challenges of being in the shoes of the decision-maker, as opposed to someone assessing a situation from afar.
- The students will learn about two deep, ethical challenges that Israel has faced .

## Outline:

### Stage 1

#### Introduction

- A. The students will learn the timeline of Jewish sovereignty
- B. The students will learn about the Supreme Court of modern Israel

### Stage 2

#### Ethical dilemmas

The students will learn about two ethical issues presented to the Supreme Court, and be asked to take a vote on how the court should rule

- A. Scenario 1: The security fence
- B. Scenario 2: The use of torture

### Stage 3

#### Discussion

Each group will share with the others what their verdicts were and why. A short discussion will unfold

### Stage 4

#### Conclusion

The students will learn what was actually decided in the real cases

## Background:

Rabbi Greenberg wrote the following on the transition the Jewish People have undergone as they assumed power:

The State of Israel was designed to place power in the hands of Jews to shape their own destiny and to affect or even control the lives of others. Creating the state meant that Jews took on major responsibility for saving their own lives... Taking power and the costs of power in human lives and resources have become central concerns of the Jewish people. Inescapably, Jewish hands become dirtied with blood and guilt as they operate in the real world. The classic Jewish self-image – the innocent, sinned-against sufferer whose moral superiority sustained self-respect – is being tested and eroded. Ethical muscles not flexed for centuries are now used; sometimes they are stiff and sore...

In this paragraph, Greenberg explores the price of power. Yes, earning the right to defend ourselves is a tremendous victory for the Jewish people. However, being autonomous, wielding weapons, and having to make tough decisions that affect millions of people is still new territory for the Jewish people. In this sense, perhaps it was morally easy to be a victim, because everyone sides with the underdog, and it's easy for the weak person to come off as morally superior. The challenge is to have power, to live as an independent body in the world, making decisions and calling the shots without losing one's moral compass. Autonomy is where things start to get messy.





















