THE FOLLOWING TEXT, a legal responsum authored by Rabbi Menashe Klein (1924–2011), explores what it means to vote in American elections. Writing in response to a query from one of his followers, Rabbi Klein discusses whether participation in an election implicates the voter in actions taken by a candidate once in office. Rabbi Klein, a Holocaust survivor who moved to Brooklyn to rebuild the Ungvar Hasidic dynasty, was known for his extreme antipathy to secular American life, culture, and politics. Although he worries that participation in American civic life will lead to assimilation, he concludes that abstaining from voting may lead to a worse outcome than what could be attained through electoral participation. In the process, he crafts a model of how to vote while maintaining one's distance from the broader political and social order.

RABBI MENASHE KLEIN
MISHNEH HALACHOS 12:374

Does one who votes in an election for the government have a portion of responsibility for the actions of the elected?

When one participates in an election, it seems as if he were joining and becoming part of all the activities, the policies, and the country—as if he were a part of them and their masses. The candidates and the government claim that every citizen in the state is, generally and particularly, part of the state, and that by means of the election, he shows his sense of commitment with respect to the entire country, and is a good citizen and a fellow to everyone. But we are obliged, as much as possible, to separate from them, as it is written, "I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine" (Leviticus 20:26), "you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), and not to be part of the nations, even "when they are in the land of their enemies" (Leviticus 26:44). On the contrary, in the land of the nations, one needs additional distancing, so as not to draw close to them, or, God forbid, to mingle with them. Go and see what has happened, in our great sins, to them and their children: the memory of the haters of Israel [a euphemism for "Israel"] has almost, God forbid, been wiped away by assimilation, all because of getting too close to them and their ways.

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But on the other hand, in the cities of Europe, the righteous and the leaders of the generation would vote, make efforts, and participate in elections. Also, if we come out against everything, there’s a concern of provoking enmity, which they [i.e., the rabbis] were very concerned about, and especially in a country which, to its credit, gives freedom to all Jews, and which, as it currently exists, is a government of kindness. And thus, everyone needs to take a position according to the need of the moment.

There’s no way to judge this matter generally, rather everything depends on the place and time: choose the lesser evil. The matter hinges on each particular candidate that has been set to vote for according to the government’s laws. It is analogous to someone who is sick on Yom Kippur, who is fed little by little [i.e., as little as is necessary for their health]. So too, if there are before us two candidates, one must weigh between them and choose the lesser evil. Certainly, if there is a candidate which will walk in the ways of the Torah, it is preferable to one that will not walk in the ways of the Torah, and similarly one who violates a rabbinic law and not a biblical one, and so on.

As was said, such a matter really belongs to the leaders of the generation to determine. Thus in the states of Europe, the leaders of the generation would determine exactly how to behave. One needs to judge this matter according to the needs of the moment, and “it is a moment to act for God,” and everything is for the sake of Heaven, and not every person is able to judge such a case.

In truth, if a person does not participate in the election, maybe by means of this one will elect a destroyer, who is even worse than the person one was considering voting for. [One should] choose the lesser evil, as it is written in the Talmud, ”to nullify one before the other“. Both are not good, but nonetheless, one should choose the lesser evil and nullify the worse [option] . . . Thus one needs to ask a sage in these matters, and not to decide for oneself.

SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
1. Klein contrasts two ways of thinking about voting: as an individual act that expresses the deep, comprehensive beliefs of the voter, or as tactical, utilitarian maneuvering by an impersonal bloc or community. Which of these models describes how you think about voting? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

2. In the responsum, Klein argues that a religious leader should dictate how people vote. This vision of an individual “rebbe” may be undesirable, but few of us make our decisions about voting alone; communities and institutions shape how and for whom we vote. What are the contexts that shape how you vote? What kind of left “bloc” exists right now, and what could contribute to a stronger or more organized one?

3. Klein seems ambivalent about voting, wavering in his perspective throughout the responsum and never directly addressing the questioner’s query. How have your own ideas and feelings about voting changed and developed over time? How do elections fit into your politics as they are expressed in different spheres—public or private, within workplaces or families, and so on?