



## Ending U.S.-Sponsored Torture Forever DVD Discussion Guide for Jewish Communities

### **Introduction**

Since 2002, the United States government has engaged in torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. These practices are illegal under U.S. law and considered immoral within most, if not all, faith traditions.

This discussion guide was prepared by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) to facilitate discussion of the video “Ending U.S.-Sponsored Torture Forever.” **You can view and download the video, order a copy of it on DVD for \$5.00, and access all the resources and links mentioned in this discussion guide at: [www.nrcat.org/300](http://www.nrcat.org/300).**

The video describes the torture practices of the U.S. government since 9/11, portrays the lasting effects on the survivors of torture around the world, and offers perspectives from a variety of faiths. Most faiths affirm that torture is a moral issue and that torture is always wrong.

Six different versions of this discussion guide have been prepared to address the needs of different faith groups: Catholics, evangelical Christians, Jews, mainline Protestants, Muslims, and Unitarian Universalists. To download any of these versions, go to: [www.nrcat.org/DVDguide](http://www.nrcat.org/DVDguide).

NRCAT is also suggesting that you make copies of its statement on a Commission of Inquiry ([www.nrcat.org/COIpetition](http://www.nrcat.org/COIpetition)) and ask that participants in the session consider endorsing the statement.

### **Suggestions for Using this DVD**

This DVD is useful for a variety of settings within your synagogue. It can be used for an adult education class of approximately one hour, or a Hebrew High school class. Because the film does not contain many graphic images, with the right framing it would be suitable for a pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah ethics discussion. For those synagogues that show films on Shabbat, the DVD can be used for a Friday night discussion or a Shabbat lunch and learn. The film is also appropriate for an interfaith community or campus program.

### **Preparing for the Discussion**

We suggest that facilitators preview the video and read through the discussion guide to decide how you would like to present the material. Think through your own feelings and responses, so you are not surprised during the discussion. Feel free to add your own thoughts, questions, and prayers! The video includes religious voices of various faiths – all stating that torture is wrong. However, there may be a variety of opinions expressed during the discussion, and openness and honesty should be encouraged.

Here is a quick preparation checklist:

- **Register your participation in the project at [www.nrcat.org/300](http://www.nrcat.org/300).**
- Advertise early and often within and outside the congregation. Announce it in worship. Consider a press release.

- Determine who will participate in leadership and reading of questions/prayers.
- Test the DVD with the equipment (DVD player and TV) you will be using for the session.
- Make copies of NRCAT's petition form calling for a Commission of Inquiry as one way for participants to join the effort to end U.S.-sponsored torture. You can download a copy from the NRCAT website at [www.nrcat.org/COIpetition](http://www.nrcat.org/COIpetition).
- Occasionally participants will ask for the definition of torture that is being used. A link to the definition from the Convention Against Torture, which is U.S. law, can be found at [www.nrcat.org/definition](http://www.nrcat.org/definition).

When promoting the screening within your synagogue or educational setting, be prepared both for questions about Israel and about introducing a political subject into the community. Remind people that torture is a non-partisan issue, with many Americans of all political persuasions opposed to the use of torture, and that the question of torture as a moral challenge to American society goes beyond political labels. Concern about torture in Israel is real, but should not prevent discussion of American use of torture.

Publicity materials (synagogue bulletin articles, email announcements, *bimah* announcements, etc.) should stress that the discussion will be open to people of all perspectives. The primary question should be "Why should the Jewish community care about ending torture?"

### **Additional Resources**

As a facilitator you may want to visit or encourage participants to visit [www.nrcat.org](http://www.nrcat.org), where we have a list of our member organizations, statements on torture from most of the major Jewish denominations, further worship and prayer resources, and ways that your congregation can become involved to end U.S.-sponsored torture. Many of these resources could be helpful both in your preparation for the class and in your community's discernment about its response.

## **Session Outline**

### **Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)**

Ask participants to introduce themselves. Then introduce the class and the video. Here is a sample introduction:: "Everyone comes to this discussion session with many thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, some of which we may not even be aware. We may have conflicting views. The purpose of this discussion is for us to begin to discuss U.S. practices and to look at that policy through the eyes of faith. We will specifically be exploring a comparison between the reality that many Americans do think torture is justifiable in some situations and the Jewish perspective (based on the Torah, Jewish values, and the Jewish historical experience of torture) that would lead us to the conclusion that torture is always wrong."

***Set a spiritual tone for the event.*** You might want to consider beginning with a prayer for people everywhere who have been victims of torture, such as the *Misheberach for Victims of Torture* found on the RHR-NA website. Raise the idea that Jews have been the historic victims of torture and that Judaism demands concern for the well-being of the stranger, since we were strangers in the land of Egypt. *Consider allowing a moment of silence after the film.*

### **Video Screening (20 minutes)**

Insert DVD and select “For a single session” from the main menu. The video will begin screening immediately.

**Discussion** (20-30 minutes total)

Now we’ll discuss some of what Judaism says on the issue of torture.

*Sample questions*

- 1) Jewish tradition holds that all human beings are created in the image of God, and that to dishonor another human being is to dishonor God. The rabbis also teach that to humiliate another is akin to killing them. Are these compelling arguments against torture from a Jewish perspective? What other Jewish values do you think prohibit the use of torture?
- 2) Jewish tradition also teaches that to save a life is to save the whole world. Can this be used to justify torture or prohibit it? Would the Jewish view on torture be different in your mind if torture were actually effective?
- 3) In the first half of the film, interrogator Matthew Alexander describes the situation in Iraq when he arrived as “living the ticking time bomb scenario” and argues that rapport building techniques were much more effective in saving lives than any torture could be. Would this be an effective argument that torture does not serve as a form of *pikuach nefesh* (the saving of a life)? Would Jewish tradition argue that if we can achieve the same ends (saving a life) through less drastic measures, that is what we should try to do? (For more on this question, see Rabbi Ed Feld’s “Curriculum on Human Dignity, Self-Defense, and Judicial Process” at [www.rhr-na.org](http://www.rhr-na.org).)
- 4) Jews have historically been the victims of torture. Does that give us a special obligation to try to end it?
- 5) Would Jewish tradition support the argument that the war on terror requires a new way of looking at war and terrorists? Would Jewish tradition support the argument that we should be willing to use the moral compass as our enemies?
- 6) Torture scenarios assume that the victim has something to tell. But many victims of torture have been innocent bystanders. Is it acceptable in the Jewish tradition to harm innocent in the hopes of finding the guilty? How many innocent?

**Jewish Resources on Torture**

These resources might be useful to the facilitator in preparing for the discussion, or to distribute as handouts. They, along with other resources, can be found in the Campaign Against Torture section of the Rabbis for Human Rights-North America website ([www.rhr-na.org](http://www.rhr-na.org)).

[“Six Questions to Clarify Your Position,”](#) Rabbi Margaret Holub

[“Text Study: The Question of Self-Defense and the Ticking Time Bomb”](#) Rabbis Brian Walt and Jarah Greenfield

[Curriculum on Human Dignity, Self-Defense, and Judicial Process](#), Rabbi Edward Feld

[Jewish Values and Torture](#), Rabbi Melissa Weintraub

[2008 Conference Transcript: Beyond Guantanamo](#), Tom Wilner and Gita Gutierrez