

Political Action
Rabbi Janet Burden

When I was still living in the United States, I did some volunteering for my local Amnesty International group. I met a lovely man named Ariel Dorfman, who was a visiting professor at Duke. Ariel was a Chilean exile, a secular Jew, who fled in the wake of the American-supported coup and President Salvador Allende's murder in 1973. Some of you will be familiar with his play, *Death and the Maiden*.

Ariel helped Amnesty with fundraising by doing poetry readings. He took an interest in all those who became involved in the group, including me. He asked how I had come to be involved in human rights work. I told him of my need to do something in what seemed like a world of violence and of my reluctance to do anything overtly political. He smiled gently, saying, "It's all well and good to want to help individuals, Janet. But what do you do when a whole society goes mad? Do you know what has happened in my country? Hundreds of individuals have been 'disappeared.' It's been happening for years. Some wrongs have to be tackled politically."

I never forgot Ariel's words. Over three decades later, I can see that there are many issues of injustice and inequality that need to be addressed systemically, which I now believe means acting politically.

Those who could prevent their household from committing a sin, but do not, are responsible for the sins of their household; if they can prevent the people of their city, they are responsible for the sins of their city; if the whole world, they are responsible for the sins of the whole world. BT Shabbat 54b

How do we, as Liberal Jews, decide how and when to take political action as a movement? What might stop us from doing so?