

## **Judaism and the Laws of Work (Labor Day Sermon)**

Sermon by Rabbi Arnold Saltzman

Labor Day Weekend is the last great getaway of the season. Having a Labor Day weekend is a curiosity, or is it? How does Judaism support the idea of ‘time off’ for the worker? What does Judaism teach us about the worker, and does it say anything about the organization of labor and its importance to society? In what manner are we taught to honor those who labor in our society?

To begin with it does not take much to turn labor into slavery. How? The word for slave in Hebrew is Eved, and the word for work is Avodah from the same root - Ayin, Vet, Dalet. This implies that the abuse of work can become slavery.

The very beginnings and foundation of Judaism are built on the idea that when we were in Egypt, a slave could not have a time when they were their own master of their time and family. The laws of Shabbat are a reaction to this very notion - freedom includes the ability to have a day of rest in order to refresh and to thank God for the goodness of life itself.

Traditional Judaism takes this and interprets it into a collection of restrictive laws, sh'vut, which involve 39 types or categories of work not permitted on the Sabbath, such as cutting, carrying, writing, traveling, etc. In essence, the restrictions were imposed so that there would never be a return to slavery.

Labor in Judaism is a source of pride. Maimonides speaking of Tzedakah, has the highest step of the ladder being ‘to give a person a job, the means to be independent’ rather than relying on charity or loans. There are over one hundred laws related to work in the Torah, and Jewish sympathy and concern for labor has its practical origin in the fact that many of our parents, grandparents, or ancestors worked long hours at poorly paid jobs - tailoring, pressing, cutting, button hole making and sewing, pattern making, designing.

My father, his father, my grandmother and grandfather, and their siblings were all involved the clothing industry. They were happy to have a job, and almost never were out of work. No one ever declared bankruptcy, and I can't say they were unhappy, as their roots were in Europe where they had seen severe poverty and stagnation of communities along with brutal pogroms.

Jewish Law, Talmudic Law, was different, since Greece, Egypt and Rome looked down on the laborer. According to Aristotle, “Labor stupefies both mind and body

and deprives man of his natural dignity .... The title of citizen belongs only to those who need not work to live.” (Aristotle. Politics, Parts 6, 8, 10, 11.) In contrast to this Jewish scholars taught ‘love labor, hate mastery.’ (Avot 1:10). Leaving the corner of the field is an example of social justice.

Many rabbis also had day jobs as woodcutters, construction workers, tailors, farmers, carpenters, blacksmiths, tanners, bakers, and shoemakers. You might be surprised to know that through the discovery of the Geniza fragments in Cairo, we have learned that Jewish women worked and were encouraged to work 1000 years ago. How do we know? We have bills and inventory saved for seamstresses, wedding gown makes, Henna artists, fabric dyers, and more... We learn in Avot 2:2 ‘Excellent is the study of Torah together with a worldly occupation’.

Businesses sometimes work well and have the benefit of the laborer in mind, as with Julius Rosenwald who created Sears Roebuck, or the late Sid Harman who created Harmon Kardon Electronics that now employs over 10,000 people and was voted one of the best companies to work for.

Other businesses, we know did not protect workers, such as in the famous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in which 123 women and 26 men were killed, most of them between the ages of 14 to 23. The owners had the doors locked and the fire escape locked so that most died of smoke inhalation. This was the beginning of the Ladies Garment Workers Union which fought sweatshop conditions. You might be surprised to know that in the late 19th century women worked in coal mines and were regularly harassed while in the mines.

The iconic actor, Theodore Bikel, who passed away recently, was head of Actors Equity, a union of 11,000 actors, many of whom are out of work at a given moment. What good is there Union? It provides contracts with specific and basics, such as separate dressing rooms for men and women, breaks during work, overtime, a limit on how many hours you can rehearse. It provides a pension plan, medical carriers, and a Credit Union at low interest for actors to borrow to pay rent, take a class, or pay for their child’s nursery.

Samuel Gompers formed the AFL to better the wages, hours, and conditions people worked in, fostering collective bargaining. Justice Arthur Goldberg was the lawyer who brought the AFL and CIO together. My mother-in-law Norma Nissenson, was the first woman president of a CIO council in Denver in 1942 together with founding the first human rights council in 1942.

In Talmud Nezikin it states that workers are entitled to protective rights beyond their agreement, going further by saying the worker should have the advantage.

**“Thou shalt not oppress thy neighbor, nor rob him: the wages of a hired servant shall not abide with thee all night until the morning”;**

**Lev 19:13**

and

**“Thou shalt not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren or of thy strangers that are in thy land within thy gates [non-Israelites]. In the same day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor and setteth his heart upon it.”**

**Deut: 24:14,15**

Other laws involve the right to stop work, the right to quit, the right to eat, sick and disability pay for injury on the job.

Employees also have obligation so they do not cheat their employer.

A fantastic fact is that the Talmud already speaks of trade unions: the Goldsmiths, the Silversmiths, metalworkers and weavers sat together or went to their own congregations. The wool-weavers and dyers have the power to say, “Any order which comes to town - all of us will share in it.” The bakers have the right to make agreement on weights and measures among themselves .... The shipmasters have the right to declare, “Whosoever ship is lost - we shall provide him with another ship.” Baba Metzia, 11:24 - 11:26

They even have the right to strike!

These laws foreshadowed modern labor law, and explain in some way the great sympathy the Jewish people have had for the working person, even when they have achieved the greatest success, they have not forgotten these roots in Jewish law. We need only look at the most successful Jewish entrepreneurs, like the founder of Starbucks, or Facebook, to see that whether they know it or not, it is not an accident that they have sympathy for those who work for them.

On Labor Day, we should remember to not take those in our community who labor for granted. May they not be living in the shadows, may they not be the invisible of our world. May their hands, minds and hearts be blessed, and may we continue to recognize that together we make a better world. Help us to see

those who labor wherever they are and to offer words of thanks and appreciation, then we will have fulfilled the mitzvah of making their burden a little lighter.