

April 9th, 2016
Rosh Hodesh Nissan

Worker Justice and Pesach

Good morning. We are the Food Justice Interns from CBI. Our work has been supported this year by an innovation grant from Jewish Theological Seminary, and we're excited to be sharing with the community what we've been spending our time working on. Over the past year we have been learning about issues of food and worker justice. We partnered with the Pioneer Valley Worker's Center and the Tikkun Olam committee, to gain an understanding of what food justice means and why it should matter to us as Jews.

We are speaking to you today on Rosh Hodesh Nissan, the month of Passover. The month of Nissan is often called the month of redemption and miracles. We are all familiar with the Passover story of oppression and liberation. Passover signifies our move as a people from slavery into freedom—certainly a miracle to be celebrated and remembered. For most Jews, Passover is the most significant holiday of the year, demonstrating the centrality of liberation to our religion. As we enter this time and are asked to think back on our own liberation, we begin to wonder what our tradition has to teach about modern day oppression. How can we be sure we are standing with the oppressed? In what ways might we be contributing to others' oppression? Why is our food system broken, and what might Torah have to say about how it could be healed? Thinking of the month of Nissan, we wondered what miracles might be needed today. As Jews we are mandated to do tikkun olam, the work of helping to heal the world. We are participants in making miracles, not bystanders.

Here in the "happy valley" it's easy to think we have food justice all figured out. We pride ourselves on our farmers' markets and throw around buzzwords like "local" or "fair-trade". And yet just scratching the surface of the food system, we begin to see there are so many hidden issues of injustice all wrapped together. Nationally, around 18 percent of jobs are in the food system. Here in the Pioneer Valley, thanks to our rich farmland, we've learned that figure is closer to sixty percent. That's an incredible amount of our population whose lives are directly affected by how food system workers are valued and treated.

Food stands at the intersection of environmental and social justice. As you begin to examine what appears to be one simple, stand-alone issue, you start to see how interconnected social and environmental issues are. We can look, for example, at pesticide use, which pollutes soil and groundwater, harming the ecosystems in the soil and downstream, but pesticides also must be applied by humans, creating challenging and dangerous working conditions for farm workers.

And farm workers are only one link in the food system chain of workers. It's hard to wrap your mind around how many people come together to make food appear on our dinner plates. One helpful way of thinking about this chain is to imagine all the people involved in bringing food to your table. Imagine before shul this morning, you went out to breakfast and ordered a pancake. First, there was the farm worker who grew the wheat. Then a transport person picked up and delivered

that wheat to a mill. At the mill someone ground the flour. Another truck driver delivered it to a processing plant, where someone packed it into a bag, and then yet another driver hauled it to the grocery store, where someone stocked the shelves. A cashier rang up the bag as it was purchased by a chef at the restaurant. Then the chef prepped the flour, mixing it with eggs and sugar (which have production stories all their own). Finally a server picked up the plate and delivered it to your table, where you munched happily on that sweet morning treat. How often have you stopped to wonder, how were all these workers treated? Were they paid enough to live on? Were they safe while on the job? Were they exposed to dangerous chemicals, grueling hours? Did they receive health care?

This year in our internship we have focused largely on restaurant workers' struggles, since we are here in downtown Northampton, where there are around one hundred restaurants employing people. We have learned about the fight for fifteen, an effort to increase the minimum wage to a livable one, as well as the right to unionize and organize as workers. We've learned about the lack of overtime pay, wage theft, and harassment that happens on the job all the time. We've also learned about agricultural worker struggles from the Ag Action Network. There are a lot of people who have been working here in the valley for decades, but don't have legal status and thus make very low wages, can't get good legal representation, and don't have basic housing needs met.

So what does Judaism have to say about this? Is the food system a new problem? Or has Torah presented us with a path that could make the whole system more just? And are we as Jews supposed to care about these issues?

There is a story in the Talmud that illustrates a Jewish response to worker injustice. In the story, porters are hired by Raba Bar Bar Hanan, and they accidentally break a jug of his wine. When he learns that they have no money to pay for it, he takes their clothes and refuses to pay them for their day of work. The porters seek out a great sage named Rav and ask for justice to be done. Rav goes to Raba Bar Bar Hanan and tells him to give the porters their clothes back, and goes even further—saying they should also be paid for their work. Raba Bar Bar Hanan asks, "Is this the law?", and Rav replies, "Yes, because of the principle you should walk in the ways of the good and the righteous".

We want to focus on the last line and to highlight just how radical a message Rav is delivering here about worker justice. In telling Raba Bar Bar Hanan that he must "walk in the ways of the good and the righteous," Rav is in effect saying that although Raba bar bar Chanan was acting within the letter of the law by taking the workers clothes and refusing to pay them--that he was still not doing the right and ethical thing. Rav was telling him that a true mensh and ethical employer needs to hold oneself to a higher standard of justice. To "walk in the ways of the good, and the righteous." It is built in to a Jewish standard of justice to not only do what the law commands, but to go beyond it. Holding ourselves to a standard higher than what is the basic written law is fundamental to a Jewish standard.

We found this story illuminating in light of our learning and work with the Worker's Center here in town. Through the worker's center, we heard countless stories of worker injustice. Wage theft, which means workers not being paid the minimum wage, or not being paid overtime, or being penalized unfairly, is very

common. We even heard a story very similar to that of Raba Bar Bar's porters, where workers made a mistake and were forced to work without pay in order to "pay it back." The issues facing people in the time of the Talmud are alive and well. Just getting employers—farm, grocery store, and restaurant owners—to adhere to the basic laws around fair labor seems challenging.

There is currently an effort happening in town called the Restaurant Worker's Bill of Rights. This Bill is attempting not to do what Rav called for in the story above, asking Raba Bar Bar hanan to go beyond the law to do what is not only required, but what is good and just. This bill of rights is instead only asking for the most basic worker rights to be protected. It's currently in the community resources committee of the city council, and the Pioneer Valley Worker's Center is working on a campaign to get it through. It is remarkable that even this bill, which simply asks for basic laws to be adhered to, is proving a massive challenge to gain traction. The Talmud has shown us that we are to do more than what is required. How can we lend our Jewish voices to an effort that is just asking for the community to hold to basic laws? How can we live our lives and run our businesses in such a way that we go beyond the law and enter the realm of the 'good and the just,' as Rav said? What might a food system look like when workers are treated with more than the bare minimum of care? What would that do to change their lives? And how would it change the life of the business owner as well?

The laws of the Talmud are not just to protect the poor or oppressed. They are also to help us as Jews not fall into the role of being an oppressor. When we are able to actually shed all our patterns and habits that keep us involved in oppressing others, how free will we feel? Then we will be able to experience true freedom, both of not being oppressed and not oppressing others.

Lilla Watson, an indigenous Australian artist and activist said, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." This month we immerse ourselves in our history of being enslaved. As we think about our feast meals to celebrate this liberation, let us commit to not oppressing others. Let us all as a community make commitments that we will take the time to explore and understand the stories of the food that sits on our Passover table. Let us understand that all food workers' liberation is linked with our own as Jews. We ask that you use the Passover meal as a chance to research your food choices, and to hold those choices in the context of our work as Jews to do tikkun olam, and create a world where all people are treated with dignity and respect.

If you are interested in learning more and supporting worker justice, there is a petition to move forward the wage theft ordinance and a campaign to contact the city councilors individually on the Pioneer Valley Worker's Center facebook page that you can sign and share. You can also join us next week at our class post-kiddush to explore these questions more. Thank you very much.

