

Jewish Texts on Labor

A Guide for Rabbis When Rosh Hashanah falls on Labor Day

לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק שֹׁכֵר עֲנִי
וְאֶבְיֹן מֵאַחֶיךָ אִוּ מִגֵּרְךָ
אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצְךָ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ

"You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in one of the communities of your land."

For the first time in a generation, Labor Day in America falls on Rosh Hashanah 5782. Not since 1994 have we had this opportunity to focus attention on the issues of work and workers. As many of us emerge from the pandemic and we reflect on its many impacts, the problems of workers demand our attention. The New England Jewish Labor Committee is offering this short collection of teachings as a guide for Rabbis to bring to your communities in sermons, teachings, handouts, or actions.

Throughout the Torah, the question of Labor is of great importance. In Bereshit, God rests after the work of Creation, teaching the value of work and stressing the need for non-work time. At the heart of Shemot is the story of oppressed immigrant laborers who toiled in slavery and joined together to find liberation. Our journey from slavery to freedom provides the foundation for Jewish values of protecting the most vulnerable among us.

The New England Jewish Labor Committee works to educate, mobilize and organize the Jewish community in support of economic justice and worker's rights. For more information, to bring a speaker to your congregation or to view videos from this year's Labor Seder, visit newenglandjewishlabor.org.

Jewish Labor Committee

JLC

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NEW ENGLAND
JEWISH LABOR
COMMITTEE

Fair Wages

Jewish Learning

Why does he climb a ladder or hang from a tree or risk death? Is it not for his wages? Another interpretation – ‘His life depends on them’ indicates that anyone who denies a hired laborer his wages, it is as though he takes his life from him. –Bava Metzia 112a

Tzedakah comes from tzedek, justice, which coerces us to share our wealth. God-given wealth is meant to also serve social purposes, whether we desire it, and whether we feel that the cause is justified or not... it is enforced social responsibility. –Rabbi Meir Tamari

Wage Theft in Massachusetts

Bad employers increasingly use subcontracting and outsourcing deals to dodge responsibility for their workers. This epidemic of wage theft has overwhelmed the capacity of our existing labor laws and enforcement, resulting in just under **\$1 billion in wages stolen** in Massachusetts each year. [Learn more here.](#)

One Fair Wage

Ending the legality of sub-minimum wages – ensure every worker makes a secure living wage. During the pandemic, many tipped workers are earning far less than even the standard minimum wage. In addition, the sub-minimum wage exposes tipped workers to many dangers, including widespread sexual harassment, by customers and management. Learn more about One Fair Wage and why we need to how [workers have been hard hit during COVID-19](#). “States that have eliminated the tipped minimum wage have less [poverty among workers in key tipped industries](#).”

Right to Organize

Jewish Learning

The Shulchan Aruch ruled that “[c]raftsmen may make regulations pertaining to their work, to mutually agree that one will not work on the day his neighbor is employed, etc., and that all transgressors will be punished in a certain manner.”

The late Chief Rabbi of Israel, HaRav Uzziel, stated that our sages “recognized the regulations of craftsmen or of workers’ federations, either in the form of one general union or in the form of separate professional ones in order to protect himself, the worker thus had the right to organize, and to enact suit-able regulations.”

“Ben-Tzion Meir Chai Uziel (1880-1953), the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Palestine and then of Israel from 1939 until his death, comments, “Employers are obligated to behave with love, honor, goodwill and generosity toward their workers.”

The Protecting the Right to Organize Act (PRO Act)

Simply put, the Protecting the Right to Organize Act is the most important national worker empowerment legislation in generations. The bill does essentially three things: it holds corporations accountable for union-busting; it protects workers’ right to form and join unions, including in new industries like Big Tech, and repeals so-called “right to work” laws. “Right to work” is really a euphemism for “right to bust unions and harm workers.” The U.S. House of Representatives already passed the bill on March 9. President Biden is ready to sign the PRO Act into law if it gets through the Senate to his desk. [Learn more about the PRO Act here.](#)

Protecting the Poor, The Importance of Respecting Wages

Jewish Learning

Some porters working for Raba bar bar Hanan broke a jug of wine. He seized their clothes. They came before Rav, and Rav said to Raba bar bar Hanan, "give them their clothing." Raba bar bar Hanan said to him, "Is this the law?" Rav said, "yes, because of the principle 'you should walk in the ways of the good (Proverbs 2:20)." He gave them back their clothes. They said to him, "we are poor, and we troubled ourselves to work all day and we are needy--do we receive nothing? Immediately, Rav said to Raba bar bar Hanan, "Go, give them their wages." He said to Rav, "Is this the law." Rav said, "yes-- 'you should keep the ways of the righteous.'" –Bava Metzia 83a

Anyone who withholds what is due to the poor blasphemes against the Maker of all, but one who is gracious unto the needy honors God. –Proverbs 14:31

There shall be no needy among you—for the Eternal will surely bless you in the land that the Eternal your God is giving you as an inheritance. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land; therefore I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land. –Deuteronomy 15: 4, 11

The children of Israel are [God's] servants and not servants to servants. –Bava Kamma 117b

Sources

- <http://www.jewishlaborcommittee.org/LaborRightsInTheJewishTradition.pdf>
- <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20052010/jacobs-living-wage.pdf>
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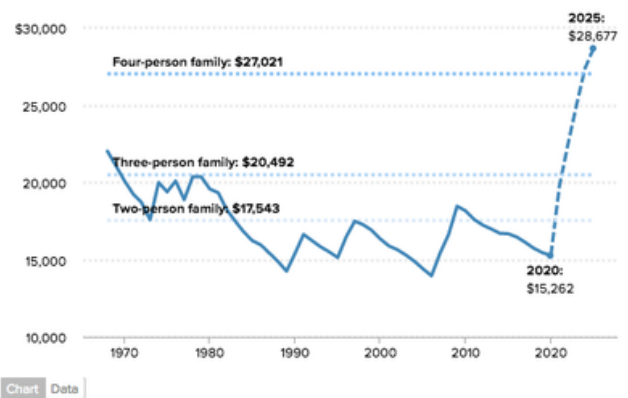
Federal Poverty Level and Minimum Wage

The minimum wage is not set to keep a family out of poverty – it is nowhere near a living wage. The current federal minimum wage has not been raised in 10 years. The Raise the Wage Act of 2021, which phases in a \$15 minimum wage by 2025, would raise the earnings of 32 million workers, or 21% of the workforce.

FIGURE E

At \$15 in 2025, the federal minimum wage would no longer be a poverty wage

Annual wage income for a full-time federal minimum wage worker compared with various poverty thresholds (2021\$), 1968–2025



Sources: Authors' calculations of federal minimum wage values (adjusted for inflation using the CPI-U-RS and inflation projections from the Congressional Budget Office 2020), and 2019 weighted average poverty thresholds from U.S. Census Bureau 2020, adjusted to 2021 dollars.

Economic Policy Institute