



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

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**Shabbat Parashat Behar**  
**May 25, 2019 - 20 Iyyar 5779**



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### The People Who Work for Us

Torah Reading: Leviticus 25:1 - 26:2

Haftarah Reading: Jeremiah 32:6 - 27

***“If your kinsman under you continues in straits and must give himself over to you, do not subject him to the treatment of a slave. He shall remain with you as a hired or bound laborer... No one shall rule ruthlessly over the other.” (Leviticus 25: 39-40, 46)***

This chapter in Leviticus tells us that fellow Jews who fall on hard times must first be helped with loans and redemption from the enslavement of creditors, but if they still cannot pay off their debts, they become indentured servants to the Jewish creditor until they pay off their debts or until the Jubilee year, whichever comes first. As such, however, the Torah warns us here that they must not be oppressed as slaves might be; they must rather be treated as hired hands, who presumably have some protections and privileges that the Torah does not specify. The Torah in this passage unfortunately allows Jews to own non-Jewish slaves and to treat them as their property. The Torah does not delineate the exact conditions and nature of their slavery, but presumably it could include what is not allowed vis-à-vis Jews working off debts.

This is one of several places in the Torah where the rights and protections of workers are delineated.

Others include, for example, the right of workers to be paid on time (at the end of each day, according to the Torah, but on a different schedule if both parties agree to it – see Deuteronomy 24:14-15); and the right to one day off in seven (Exodus 20:10; 23:12). Later Jewish law used Deuteronomy 23:25-26 to require employers to provide meals for their workers (M. Bava Metzi'a 7:1-5) and introduced other protections for workers.

Even Jewish slaves had rights, including a six-year limit on their slavery unless they agree to more in order to stay with their wife and children (Exodus 21:2-6), the rights attributed to free women when a female slave is taken in marriage (Exodus 21:7-11), the right not to be returned to the master if the slave escapes (Deuteronomy 23:16-17), and the right to go free if the owner causes a permanent injury to the slave's eye or even his tooth (Exodus 21:26-27). Furthermore, if a master kills his slave, the master faces the penalties that any other murderer would (Exodus 21:20-21). Moreover, slaves, like hired hands, had one day off in seven (Exodus 20:10). As problematic as slavery is in and of itself as a social institution, for it treats people as property and removes their right to decide when and how to work, these biblical rules governing slavery made it something very different from what was accepted as legitimate in both law and custom in the American South before the Civil War, popularly and accurately portrayed in Uncle Tom's Cabin and Roots.

These concerns of Jewish law for employees, though, are just as important for us today as they were in the past. Rabbi Jill Jacobs, in her rabbinic ruling adopted by the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards

(<http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20052010/jacobs-living-wage.pdf> [accessed 5/21/19]), describes the plight of many workers in the United States who are "the working poor," who have jobs that do not pay them enough to sustain themselves or their families, and she asserts the responsibilities of Jewish employers to pay a living wage. Another effort of the Conservative Movement on this issue is Magen Tzedek, initiated by Rabbi Morris Allen, in which the Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative rabbis, established standards for awarding kosher food providers a Magen Tzedek (Shield of Justice) to those that meet those standards in the wake of the illegal and immoral treatment of workers in some of the kosher meat slaughterhouses. See <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/magen-tzedek> (accessed 5/21/19) for a general description of the program and

[http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/social\\_action/magen\\_tzedek/magen-tzedek-sources.pdf](http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/social_action/magen_tzedek/magen-tzedek-sources.pdf) (accessed 5/21/19) for the Study Guide that delineates the standards for awarding such a shield of approval to kosher food providers.

These concerns about working conditions are not, of course, solely those of the Jewish tradition, although laws protecting workers in the United States came much, much later than the biblical and Rabbinic sources mentioned above and still do not exist in many other nations of the world. On May 19, 2016, a front-page article by Richard Marosi in The Los Angeles Times, "Produce Giants Join to Promote Responsible Farm Labor Practices," said this:

Faced with growing questions from consumers about where their food comes from, the nation's largest produce industry groups say they are joining forces to promote responsible farm labor practices – the latest and possibly the most significant attempt by the industry to rid its supply chains of abusive treatment of workers...It was prompted in part by a Los Angeles Times investigation, published in late 2014, that exposed widespread labor abuses at Mexican export farms...

“We’re at a point in society where there’s just a tremendous amount of interest in where food is grown and how it’s grown,” said Tom Stenzel, chief executive of United Fresh. “Ten years ago we weren’t getting those questions from consumers.”

Stenzel said the initiative may be partly modeled on the audit-based approach adopted by the apparel and electronics industries after they came under scrutiny for harsh labor conditions....

As the rabbinic ruling of Rabbi Jacobs and the work of the Magen Tzedek Commission demonstrate, as Jews we have an ancient and deeply-rooted demand that we treat workers fairly, insuring their economic stability and safety. Now Americans in general are following this lead. We should be proud that our tradition has sensitized us to this set of values. As Jews, we should ensure that these values govern our buying, our personal treatment of those who work for us, and our efforts to shape our nation’s laws and labor practices.

Shabbat shalom.

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