



Labor Day: An Unexpected Jewish Holiday

By: Rabbi Ben Richards

My friend and I used to play a game we called “what secular date is the Jewish holiday on this year.” A holiday would be mentioned and we’d each take our guesses. Purim, Passover, Shavuot, etc. What a surprise it was to me when my friend mentioned Labor Day.

“Labor Day?! That’s not a Jewish holiday.” I protested.
“Of course it is!” my friend responded. “It’s probably the most Jewish holiday there is! Maybe the one most worth celebrating.”

Being a non-confrontational sort of person, I’d let it slide. But every year I’d ponder what exactly she meant, Labor Day being the “most Jewish holiday there is...the one most worth celebrating.”

Is it because of a cessation of work for one day a year that establishes an island in time, a secular Shabbat of sorts? If so, it is not the strongest of parallels; once a year is a poor substitute for once a week.

Perhaps the worthiness exists in the values Labor Day highlights. Labor Day was established as a federal holiday in 1894 through the efforts of the labor movement. The movement advocated for fair wages, safe working conditions, and treatment of workers as humans rather than chattel. The holiday they helped bring about, Labor Day, is a reminder that any service or product we partake in involves a web of immense human effort and work. Not only should we be grateful for others laboring on our behalf, but we should commit ourselves to supporting, fairly compensating, and caring for those workers in appropriate ways. But how is this type of gratitude and care for others connected to the Jewish tradition?

It turns out, these same values surrounding Labor Day are found early and often in the Jewish tradition, and especially in our Talmud.

In Bava Metzia 83a, we read of an incident between Rabba bar bar Hanan and Rav, regarding some of Rabba bar bar Hanan’s hired porters:

These certain porters broke Rabba bar bar Hanan’s barrel of wine.
He took their cloaks. They came and told Rav.
Rav said to Rabba bar bar Hanan: Give them their cloaks.
Rabba bar bar Hanan asked him: Is this the law?
Rav replied: Yes, as it is written, “That you may walk in the way of the good.” (Proverbs 2:20)
Rabba bar bar Hanan gave them their cloaks.
The porters said to him: We are poor people and we worked all day and we are hungry and we have nothing.
Rav said to Rabba bar bar Hanan: Go and give them their wages.
Rabba bar bar Hanan asked him: Is this the law?
Rav replied: Yes, as it is written, “And keep to the paths of the just.” (Proverbs 2:20)

The story here in our Talmud highlights how fair treatment of hired laborers is not only righteous, but required of us. These are not merely suggestions for Rabba bar bar Hanan not to oppress his workers, but mandated laws. True, Rabba bar bar Hanan might have suffered a monetary loss, but he is not allowed to force compensation through whatever means he deems necessary. Rav, as a representative of the law, requires him to return the cloaks and pay the wages, in spite of the losses endured from the laborers. Rav (and much of our Talmudic tradition) requires a standard of radical thoughtfulness and empathy in dealing with one’s workers. Judaism affirms that while a person does not need to provide for or identify with a hammer or nail, when it comes to human beings, things are different. They are not merely tools or implements to utilize and store. Their lives have equal worth to those of their bosses, and therefore the relationship must be one of respect, honesty, and gratitude.

Our tradition recognizes that there are many things in the workplace we cannot control: things will break, tempers will be lost and change will occur. Yet the one thing we do control is how we respond to these events and how we treat our fellow working partners. Our shared humanity dictates that we must have compassion and respect for one another, especially in the workplace.

Perhaps this is why my friend considers Labor Day the most essential of Jewish holidays. Because in the workplace where we are so likely to demean or diminish the human across from us when they don’t do what we want, it forces us to reassess. It causes us to realize that labor is hard and long, and the effort expended is not always rewarded or recognized. And yet we are partners in this planet, helpmates in the cultivation of this world. God put humanity in this beautiful “garden” of Earth to work it and guard it. It is upon us to give our all when we work in this world, and to guard the rights and humanity of one another as we do it. A worthy goal to labor towards, indeed

Wishing a meaningful and restful Labor Day to all of you!



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