

YK Morning: "Like a Nation That Does Right"

Each year when we read this morning's Haftarah, I find myself thinking, here it is – this morning's sermon. Thousands of years ago the prophet Isaiah, in words far more powerful and poetic than any of us could write, called us to account by challenging us to cease our hypocrisy and laziness, and to concern ourselves with the well-being of our fellow human beings. It occurred to me to simply re-read to you Isaiah's words, and leave the interpretation to you. (And perhaps when I finish, you will wish I had done just that.)

But it is traditional to search among our Biblical sources for ways the text speaks to us today, the relevance of the words in our times. And this text, like God's voice, cries aloud to us. Listen to some of Isaiah's words once more: They seek Me daily, LIKE a nation that does what is right, and has not abandoned its God. . . .because on your fast day you see to your business and oppress all your laborers!

Though none of us in this room individually is intentionally guilty of thinking only of our business, or oppressing workers, we ARE a nation that acts merely LIKE, as IF we did what is right, when we know our actions more often resemble those of the Biblical oppressors of laborers. And we know better; throughout the Torah we are told how to treat one another, with special emphasis on the treatment of those who are less fortunate than we are. We are constantly reminded that we know what it was like to be slaves; therefore we are obligated to show both justice and compassion towards those who labor on our behalf. And

in case we don't understand the abstract laws, specific instructions delineate for us the proper treatment of workers.

In Deuteronomy we are told unequivocally that workers must be paid promptly and fairly. "You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in your land. You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends on it." What could be clearer? Yet, in this age of owners contracting work out and contractors subcontracting to other subcontractors we have evidence of more incidents than can be listed – in nearly every city in the country -- of day workers having to work for weeks on end with bosses withholding wages. No one admits responsibility; each subcontractor blames the next down the line. Frequently it is only when they are able to acquire legal representation that these workers can finally receive the pay owed them. They exist in the shadows from day to day and desperately need their pay for an honest day's work. And when they are finally paid, frequently it is less than promised which, according to Jewish teaching, is considered the same as theft.

In Cincinnati not long ago a case was brought by legal aid on behalf of janitors who worked 10 to 12 hours a night, locked into office buildings they could not leave until morning, men and women who were not paid for months at a time. The owners of the building were not responsible; they outsourced to a temporary worker service. The temporary worker firm knew nothing about it, for they subcontracted to a smaller cleaning service. The buck kept being passed; it turned out the smaller service was not licensed to do business, had multiple

offenses in the past, yet the mega-companies continued to use it because the labor was cheap, and the owners could avoid responsibility to the workers.

Our Rabbis called underpaying of workers and poor treatment what it is: theft. Theft is equivalent to stealing a life: theft in that the worker is deprived of essentials for his life and family; theft by owners who profit by the workers' labor by not giving them their due share; theft by owners who pay less than they should, thus robbing the workers of their dignity, demeaning people who work hard yet still cannot support themselves.

Our Torah reading this morning speaks of the inclusion of all people in the covenant, from the one who chops our wood to the one who draws our water. In our modern society we might not be able to really relate to these occupations, so we might ask ourselves who are today's woodchoppers and waterdrawers? We know them, though it is all too easy to ignore them: the garbage collector, the janitors, the laundry workers, housekeepers in hotels, day laborers waiting for construction jobs in parking lots at Lowe's and Home Depots throughout the country. We know them and we know they are the most exploited, for even though they may work hard each day, they still live under the poverty line. In this, the richest nation in the history of the world, people who work hard at these tiring jobs often must still stand in line at soup kitchens, still ask for handouts for basic essentials such as school supplies for their children, still live without insurance for either health or life.

Isaiah is speaking to us, all of us. As a nation, even as individuals, we should be ashamed. Honest work should produce – at a minimum – adequate

results for a decent life, just as the Biblical slave-owner was obligated to provide for the needs of the workers, even before meeting his own needs. Even animals in the Bible are treated better than many of today's workers. Did you know that in the Torah owners of animals are commanded to feed their animals before they feed themselves, lest the owners become full and complacent from their meal, and forget that others are hungry? Likewise, contemporary employers should place paying decent wages to employees ahead of anything but necessary and fair profits. When four of the richest people in the United States today are named Walton while Wal-Mart and Sam's pay most of their employees less than minimum wages, wages so low they cannot afford the minimum health benefits Wal-Mart offers, this is not only against Biblical teachings, it is immoral and should be viewed as criminal. When the mega-corporations on Wall Street are paying millions in bonuses to executives who failed in their duties and helped cause our recession, we should be ashamed, as Isaiah wants us to be. In many other countries, Japan for example, the top executives of a company earn 8 to 10 times the pay of the average worker. In the United States 100 to 200 times the amount is considered conservative by most estimates.

“Remove the chains of oppression, make sacrifices for the hungry, satisfy the needs of the afflicted,” says Isaiah. It would not require much sacrifice, not real sacrifice, for the top 1/2% in our nation to take a slightly smaller salary so that their workers might earn a decent living for decent work. What would this mean? Simply that we insist on a real national minimum wage, or decent state

minimum wages so that a family with a full-time wage earner is not left struggling below the poverty line., dependent upon the charity of others.

Some would argue that raising the minimum wage will send more jobs out of the country, and hurt the small business owner. This is the same argument presented every time the issue of raising the minimum wage is brought up, and it has never proven to be the case. On the contrary, more people will be want to be employed, since it will be financially worth while to get off welfare. If people are earning enough to pay their bills, buy into in health plans, they will also be able to pay their taxes, and the government – you and I -- will have no longer have to support them. The average worker has fallen behind in real wages; the poorest workers have fallen even further behind. It pays to have people gainfully employed. It is good for the workers, good for the society, good for the economy and the government. And it is the right thing to do.

Guaranteeing workers a living wage might also help us improve the current impasse regarding illegal workers. Although a majority of citizens claim to be against undocumented workers, many of our richest and most powerful Americans find the status quo perfect for their own purposes, their financial gain. One reason many large employers fight raising the minimum wage is that they pay illegal aliens so little, often placing them in a situation similar to indentured servitude, thereby creating more profit for themselves. While officially many business people claim they want to send the illegals back, to make it illegal to rent housing to them, to seal off our borders with fences, the reality is that American business right now is dependent upon these workers who live from

hand to mouth, usually earning very little, with no benefits, frightened that they will be found, imprisoned or deported. A fair living wage law would alleviate this problem in at least two ways: 1) more unemployed citizens would be willing to do difficult manual labor if they were paid decently, and 2) the undocumented workers could, themselves, rise out of their poverty a bit more quickly. They could raise their heads higher, begin to work towards citizenship and, perhaps, stand up for the rights that should be guaranteed to all.

I don't want to get into a discussion over whether we should grant citizenship to all undocumented workers, to none of them, to some of them, or whether we need a guest worker program. These political issues are important and must be resolved, but more important is the basic dignity each one of these people deserve. The majority of them are decent people just trying to better their lives the way our parents and grandparents did when they arrived here, just as all immigrants did in coming to this country. They should not have to hide in their rooms like felons. They should not be stopped when driving simply because they look different; they should not be refused service in stores or viewed suspiciously on the street. They too are created in God's image and they, the woodchoppers and water carriers of today must receive the basic dignity due all human beings.

In the book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden, God tells them the following: "By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread." The traditional understanding of this line is that God is punishing Adam and Eve, telling them they will have to work very hard in order to survive. But there is another way to read: "by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread."

We can understand it as a manual for survival – if you work hard, you will live. Perhaps God is promising them: you work hard, and you will make it. That is the promise we as a nation, we as Jews should be making to each other and, especially, to those who are not as well off as we are: If you work hard, you will make it; you will live and prosper. You will be treated fairly, you will receive a decent, living wage for your work, you will be able to live in dignity, whether in sickness or in health.

We can no longer be a nation that acts LIKE it does what is right, we must act b'tsedek, we must be just and right and lead the way. As we read this morning: If we unlock the fetters of wickedness, the menacing hand, if we make sacrifices for the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then says Isaiah, then we will truly lay the foundations for ages to come.