

Massachusetts Board of Rabbis – Statement on Labor

Do not oppress your neighbor and do not rob; the wages earned by a day laborer shall not remain overnight with you until the morning. (Lev. 19:13)

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis recognizes the central role of organized labor in protecting the rights and dignity of American workers, and supports legislation that safeguards and promotes their wellbeing.

The dignity of the worker in Jewish tradition is rooted in the dignity of the human being created in the image of God. Of equal standing before God, the employee and the employer are each servants of God, thereby equal in relation to each other, each with responsibilities toward the other. Jewish law affirms the personal autonomy of workers. “Rav said: A worker can withdraw from employment even in the middle of the day without loss.” (Bava Metzia 77a). Likewise, workers are required to be honest and responsible. In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides offers a biblical paradigm for honest employees. Before leaving his father-in-law’s employ, Jacob turned to Rachel and Leah and said: “As you know, I have served your father with all my strength” (Genesis 31:6). Citing this source, Maimonides ruled that “just as an employer must not cheat an employee, so too the employee must not cheat the employer. In what way does an employee cheat an employer? By wasting a bit of time here and a bit of time there, until the entire day has been craftily passed, with little or no work done. An employee should be like the righteous Jacob who worked with all his might for his employer” (Hilchot S’chirut, 13:7).

Though each has responsibilities to the other, the relationship between a worker and an employer is ultimately a power relationship, in which workers are the vulnerable party. In regard to all aspects of social interaction the Torah sets forth the challenge, *k’doshim tihiyu* / “you shall be holy.” In the enumeration of commandments by which the ideal is to be met, the Torah anticipates the ease with which a worker can become dependent and thereby mistreated. Regarding the obligations of employers to employees, the Torah says “You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether of your own people or a stranger.... You must pay the worker’s wage on the same day, before the sun sets..., lest in crying out to God against you, you will incur guilt.” (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). The Torah is clear in its demand that employers treat workers justly and Jewish law protects the worker from exploitation and neglect by employers.

From Samuel Gompers until today, Jews have played a central role in the American labor movement. The Yiddish verse of sweatshop poets such as Morris Rosenfeld gave voice to the anguished cry of oppressed workers: “...not a single window welcomes the sun..., toiling without letup..., blighted women, blighted men, with their spirits broken, and their bodies spent... (The Sweatshop, 1897).” Protection of workers in American law came through the courage and determination of workers to join together, and through unions to speak with one voice. Responsible for much that is taken for granted today, such as safety standards in the workplace, child labor laws, minimum wage, and the weekend, unions continue to be essential for ensuring the rights and dignity of workers.

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis has demonstrated its commitment to worker rights in the past. In a historic 1974 decision, published in English and Yiddish, the MBR called on Jews to boycott non-union lettuce and grapes as part of a campaign to support migrant farm workers.

Today, the MBR reaffirms our commitment to principles of fairness and justice in support of workers. The MBR offers the following tenets toward labor justice.

1. Aware that Jews are on both sides of contentious labor issues, the MBR calls for open discussion and for all sides to refrain from personal attacks. We call on both sides in a labor dispute to adhere to the highest ethical standards, and to work in good faith for the resolution of conflict.
2. Human dignity rests on self-determination. It follows that:
 - All workers be treated with respect and dignity.
 - All workers be paid a living wage that allows them to meet the basic needs of their families.
 - All workers be provided with affordable health care benefits for themselves and their families.
 - Employers support workers' training programs.
3. Workers have the right to organize without intimidation.

Therefore, the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis urges rabbis and congregations to:

- Draw on such resources as the Jewish Labor Committee to help raise awareness of local labor issues.
- Employ union labor where possible
- Hold all events, both communal and personal, in union-friendly venues.
- Consider the rights of those who work in our buildings and institutions, including those on professional staff, administrative support, and those who care for our buildings, whether contracted or salaried workers. In addition, we ask rabbis and congregations to be concerned for the ethical treatment of all employees of the services we use.