



Economic Justice

Daniel Sokatch

On a hot day in the summer of 2000, I stood in a union hall in downtown Los Angeles. In front of me sat 40 Latina hotel workers, members of the SEIU -- the service workers union -- who, along with several Progressive Jewish Alliance activists, had been arrested several months earlier while engaging in civil disobedience during a demonstration on behalf of luxury hotel workers seeking a living wage.

All of those arrested were sentenced to several hours of community service, and as volunteer work for a nonprofit organization satisfied the requirement, the workers were going to spend the next several hours stuffing envelopes for an upcoming PJA mailing in support of their campaign. We all appreciated the irony.

As I began to explain who I was and why I was there, one of the women called out in Spanish. The whole room broke out laughing and then applauded. I turned to the translator next to me, embarrassed at not understanding, and asked what had just happened. Somewhat sheepishly, the translator told me what the woman had shouted: "Finally, the Jews have arrived!"

For many American Jews, the obligation to work for economic justice is central. Our grandparents and great-grandparents toiled in sweatshops under unbearable, often lethal, conditions and then fought back by forming unions and promoting regulation of industry. Jewish texts are clear about the obligations that exist between employer and employee and about the responsibility of the community to those in need.

But are we translating these beliefs into meaningful action? Have we, as a community, arrived at the front lines of the struggles for economic justice in this country?

We took great pride in Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. A generation -- my generation -- of rabbis, activists, and educators came of age enthralled by Abraham Joshua Heschel's comment that in Selma, "I felt my legs were praying." We understood that the struggle for civil rights was a modern retelling of our own story of liberation. But Heschel and Martin Luther King were marching for civil rights and economic justice. They understood that the two are always connected; there can be no social equality without economic justice. King was in Memphis in support of striking sanitation workers when he was assassinated.

Today, most (although by no means all) American Jews have a measure of economic security. And the struggle of the working poor does not capture the imagination in the way that fighting against Jim Crow did 40 years ago. But in 21st century America, it is the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, the unavailability of healthcare, the evisceration of government regulation of industry, the rollback of much of the social safety net created by the New Deal and the Great Society, the return to a new gilded age of Enrons and Haliburtons, that presents perhaps the greatest challenge to the health of our democracy.

This economic inequality is also an affront to our Jewish values. The Torah says, "You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger... You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets... else he will cry to God against you and you will incur guilt." (Deuteronomy 24:14-25) And Leviticus 19 instructs us that "The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning." Mishna, Talmud, and later rabbinic authorities viewed these commands not only as ideals, but also as legal and ethical obligations, adding, among others, the requirement of paying a worker a living wage. In modern times, rabbinic authorities have used these discussions to support the right to organize for better wages and benefits (Responsa Iggerot Moshe , Rabbi Moshe Feinstein).

The fight for economic justice begins at home. Our tradition and history compel us to stand with those fighting for a living wage and decent working conditions wherever they are, especially in our own communities. Today, some Jewish communal professionals, teachers, service workers, and synagogue employees cannot afford for their own families the services they provide to the Jewish community. And too often, those who clean, staff, and guard our institutions do not receive adequate wages or affordable healthcare. We need to pay those who work for our community wages that enable them to live lives of dignity. We need to ensure that all those who make the Jewish community run -- from rabbis to janitors -- have the same access to healthcare that we demand for ourselves and for our children. Anything less is unacceptable and, frankly, un-Jewish.

Certainly, most Jewish agencies and organizations face very real budgetary constraints. But an organizational budget should also be an ethical document. In a Jewish organization, a budget should reflect the primary Jewish value of treating those who serve the community fairly and respectfully. This is as important a Jewish priority as are the very services our institutions exist to provide. This means that we cannot use our limited budgets as an excuse not to provide the wages and benefits that our community workers need. The Jewish community should look as good, responsible, and ethical to those viewing it from within as it does to those viewing it from outside.

For these reasons, in cities around the country, organizations are educating community members about the Jewish imperative to strive for economic justice, to organize the Jewish community to stand with low-wage workers, and to recognize that the struggles of the working poor to stay afloat in the economy of 21st century America are our struggles too.

This moral issue demands no less of us than did the civil rights movement of the 1960s. We must recognize that we live in what Heschel described as a "state of moral emergency." In an age of terror, war, and global insecurity, we must not lose sight of the fact that what we do about poverty and gross economic inequality today will determine the kind of America we live in tomorrow.

Daniel Sokatch is Executive Director of the Progressive Jewish Alliance, California's leading Jewish social justice organization, which has offices in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area.

(c) 2005 Sh'ma. All rights reserved. The information contained in this article may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of Sh'ma.