

There are a number of social justice lessons to take away from this week's parasha and the associated haftarah: the revoking of freedom of one-time slaves shortly after being freed, as appears in the haftarah (a familiar American theme for those who attended our [13th](#) movie viewing); the values of not neglecting an animal when it gets on the loose (something I would tie to the dangers of social media unchecked in our society); and the way we treat workers in servitude to us, which I believe has further echoes in the way we treat workers in this era. I would love to dive into each of those, but in setting a theme for where our social action committee is focusing this quarter (immigration, healthcare, and our work with POTS), I could not help but think about the ramifications this week in the way the lessons relate to home health aides in our society.

I would not call home health aides servants, but as I read the rules which governed the treatment of servants in biblical times (baseline rule: don't murder them with rods), I thought about the rights of workers in a job, like ancient servitude, that can be all consuming and become its own all-encompassing life. Home healthcare is the fastest growing [major job category](#) in our economy, and as people age (including myself over the next several decades), caring for the elderly will only be more in demand. Boomers especially are looking to age in place, and I know even in my young state of mind and body that I too, would like to age in a familiar place. I linked to an article earlier in this paragraph worth reading even as I paraphrase here as much as I can fit, and so many of the facts made my jaw drop: 45 percent of home health workers are on public assistance, and wages average at \$11.52 an hour (as of 2019), with annual salaries in the mid twenty thousand dollars.

There are many problems that unfortunately cannot be resolved for home health aides by laws (the difficult behavior of patients is unavoidable, for instance) but we can make for better situations in simple steps. I would refer people to the [New York Caring Majority site](#) for a start, where the group calls on lawmakers to make home health aides included in basic healthcare coverage and to provide better pay and benefits to workers, especially amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the parasha, we start by talking about ordinances, and specifically ordinances relating to bondsmen. In the modern era, we would certainly not tie religion to how we treat a worker (aside from basic religious accommodations), but the parasha talks about the ways we treat Jewish bondsmen. Servants are given special rules around how they attach themselves to those they serve, and voluntarily choosing to give extra time to those they serve after their term is ended occurs at a doorpost with a piercing. Rabbi Shimon bar Rabbi Yehuda HaNasisay said a doorpost is symbolically linked to allegiance to Hashem, in relation to the lamb's blood on the doorposts in Egypt, which symbolized freedom, and that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai notes that it was the ear that heard Hashem's voice at Sinai say "For to me the children of Israel are slaves". This piercing then is not a thing to be admired, and is seen as a violation of God's will for choosing a master of one's own aside from Hashem (Rabbi Shimon bar Rabbi Yehuda HaNasisay)(Kiddushin 22b).

For home health aides, similar lessons are ascribed in the article I cited earlier from the New York Times: you really are not supposed to get attached to those you work for, and it should not be seen as a long term engagement with one person. In society, we carry these feelings toward overstaying our welcome in service to one another to the view of minimum wage workers in general, asking questions like "why didn't they move on to a new profession?" For

our caretakers, that societal disdain of not extending this time of servitude does not fit the work associated. We should instead be giving people the freedoms we as a society cherish: reasonable pay, fair hours and benefits, and a life with dignity. We hope for what we wish for after the sixth year of a bondsmen's servitude in the parasha: yes, we hope these people continue to keep our loved ones alive and dignified, and we also hope that they, too, get the dignity they deserve, and thrive under the ongoing freedom that is endeavored for by all of us.