

Ki Tavo 5778 – Joyfulness Means Awareness

Rabbi Michael Safra

At its core, Labor Day is a day about awareness. The first labor unions were founded in the 19th century to give voice to unskilled workers, people we might ordinarily ignore because they work behind the scenes or behind the counter, people who are easily exploited because they are so easy to replace. The first Labor Day celebrations began as municipal ordinances in 1885 – an extra day off to signal to laborers that they and their work are valued. Oregon was the first state to establish a Labor Day, in 1887; and by 1894, 23 more states had enacted Labor Day laws. But it took a tragedy to establish Labor Day in the United States Congress.

During the Panic of 1893, the Pullman Palace Car Company cut worker wages as railroad traffic had slowed and demand for new Pullman cars had dropped. At that time, most of the company's workers were living in Pullman's "company town" on the southside of Chicago, which had been established as a model community to attract a diverse workforce to the company. When wages were cut, though, Pullman did not lower rents; and workers began to strike. There is more to the story, but I will just say that the strike grew, the federal government got involved, ostensibly to get the mail moving again. President Grover Cleveland called in the Army to stop the strike, and violence ensued. Overall, 30 workers were killed, 57 injured, and there was more than \$80 million in property damage.

In response to that unrest and in an effort to repair ties with American workers, Congress established Labor Day for the District of Columbia and US Territories in 1894.

Of course conditions in America's workplace have improved dramatically since those days – with the establishment of the 40-hour workweek, minimum wage, and safety standards. The power of labor unions has diminished dramatically. The controversy over the best way to balance values of fairness and the dignity and sanctity of work with the realities of business, competition, and the limits on what the consumer is willing to pay continues. In terms of the politics, the debate is legitimate. But from a values standpoint, all sides can agree that people who work full time should be able to earn enough to provide for their basic needs. And as consumers, we can do more to recognize, to appreciate the work that unsung heroes do for us almost every day. Those of us in management and leadership positions experience the challenge every day: we push workers to improve the bottom line, meet our goals, and move our organizations forward. And as we do that, we need to recognize that we are dealing with people, created in the image of God, who deserve basic dignities we take for granted.

Parashat Ki Tavo is a portion about gratitude. "It will happen *ki tavo el ha-aretz*, when you arrive in the land," that you will plant seeds and grow crops and experience bounty. And then "you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, put it in a basket, and bring it to the Temple." As Ethan described earlier, the people recited a formulaic history, which had the effect of reminding them that none of what they had would have been possible were it not for Forces beyond their control. No matter how skilled they were as farmers, if they were still slaves in Egypt they would have nothing. Bringing the Bikkurim reminded them not just of their history, but of the more basic truth that nobody does anything on her

own; there are always people behind the scenes, and they rarely get the credit they deserve. And we have to share. For the Torah it is the Levites – they were not apportioned land because their task was to work in the sacred space – and the widow, orphan and stranger – individuals who did not have their own land on which to produce sustenance.

The section concludes with a commandment: “ושמחת בכל הטוב, you shall rejoice in all the bounty that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you and your household, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst.” And the commentators ask: How can you have a commandment to rejoice; is it possible to legislate emotion? And what is the significance of joining in the celebration with the Levite and the stranger?

The 18th century Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, founder of Chabad, points out that sometimes wealth can be a curse. Ecclesiastes said, “Riches hoarded by their owner are his misfortune.” Pirkei Avot teaches “מרבה כספים מרבה דאגות, more money equals more trouble.” But when a person *recognizes* that wealth is a *gift* from God – and she uses her wealth for acts of charity and good deeds, she cannot help but rejoice.

Another Hasidic text adds that the joy comes from being with the Levite and stranger who, in comparison, would generally be considered poor to your rich. In understanding more about their situation, we might be more appreciative of what we have. It is the truest kind of rejoicing to be able to share our good fortune and know that their basic needs are met.

I offer this message as part of Jews United for Justice’s annual Labor on the Bima initiative. “Think Jewishly. Act Locally” is their motto. JUFJ is involved in a number of initiatives related to housing, criminal justice reform, migrant justice, and poverty. [I want to point to our member, Laura Wallace, who is here today as she is virtually every Shabbat; Laura is JUFJ’s Senior Organizer for Montgomery County.]

Last year, JUFJ was a leader in the successful campaign to raise the minimum wage to \$15 in Montgomery County. The increases are scheduled to be implemented gradually so as to be less disruptive to the economy, with different dates to meet the benchmark based on the size of the company. Once the goal has been reached, minimum wage will be indexed annually to increase with the cost of living. And there are a number of exemptions. This year, JUFJ is working with statewide partners to bring similar legislation to the state level, which would affect approximately 573,000 people – more than 50% women and minorities.

I recognize that the issue is political. Politics is the platform on which this kind of discussion or action takes place; and a sermon is not a political platform. Reasonable people can disagree as to the best way to address the balance between the need for businesses to succeed and our state to be competitive with the need to protect the rights and dignity of our workers. But we cannot use “politics” as an excuse to ignore the fact that there are people who work 30 or 40 hours and still worry at the end of the month if their paycheck will cover expenses or if they will have to choose between medicine, food, or the electric bill. Most of us do not experience that kind of dilemma on a regular basis.

A separate initiative – on September 13 (the announcement is in the Shabbat program), JUFJ is hosting a book discussion here at B’nai Israel on Matthew Desmond’s book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in*

the American City, a book that Bill Gates and President Obama both cited as the best book that they read in 2017. The book has been made into an exhibit at the National Building Museum, which has worked to create an immersive experience that brings visitors into the world of low-income renter eviction, which disproportionately impacts minority communities, and particularly African American single mothers.

The goal of both these programs is awareness. We who sit amidst the beauty of this sanctuary have to look beyond our immediate surroundings to notice the people who suffer within our sights and just beyond. Awareness is the key to gratitude and ultimately, joy. There is a reason that our sages declared that a person cannot pray in a room without widows. "*V'samahta b'khol ha-tov*, you shall rejoice in all the bounty that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you, *together* with the Levite and the stranger in your midst."

Another commandment in Parashat Ki Tavo is the injunction *lalekhet bidrakhav*, to walk in God's ways: "You have affirmed this day that Adonai is your God, that you will walk in God's ways, observe God's laws and commandments and rules, and obey God." Maimonides explains that we have been commanded to be like God, *l'hidamot bo*. Just as God is compassionate, so shall you be compassionate. Just as God is gracious, you shall be gracious.

To these ancient words, I add an additional thought for the holiday season that begins tonight with Selichot: Just as God takes account for every human being, so too must we be aware of the needs of others and the contributions that they make to our lives and well-being. Through our awareness, through our generosity, on Shabbat and on Labor Day, may we merit the fulfillment of God's command: You shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given you.