

Liberal Judaism and the Living Wage Text Study
(from Torah to Lily Montagu and beyond)

Liberal Judaism and Labour Rights

1. Lily Montagu, *'The Girl in the Background'*, 1904

*They peep down the abyss in which the underfed, the ill-housed, and badly clothed work out their life's drama, and then they turn their energies to surface polishing. They try to make their girls conduct themselves well in the clubs, and interest them and amuse them as best they can during their evening's leisure. But they are inclined to ignore the industrial life; they like to forget the grim truth that if girls work for less than a **living wage**, in a vitiated atmosphere, they are not likely to become the strong, self-controlled women whom we desire the clubs to train...*

2. R. John Rayner, *'Affirmations of Liberal Judaism'* (First published 1992)

'To be a practising Liberal Jew in the twenty-first century... is to live according to the prophetic ideal of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God.'

3. R. Alex Wright

The Living Wage Campaign is about fairness, humane employment practices, welfare of employees and the mutual obligations between employer and employee. *Gedolah mal'achah she-m'chabedet et b'alehah* – 'Great is work, for it confers dignity on those who do it' says the Talmud (*Nedarim* 49b)

Discussion Questions:

- What is the wider point Lily Montagu is making about the nature of work?
- Is Living Wage a radical or relevant response?
- What is the purpose of 'work'?
- How does one 'do justice' in the 21st century?
- What is Liberal Judaism's inheritance with regards to Social Justice?

Jewish attitudes to work

1. Nedarim 49b

Rabbi Yehuda used to go into the Beit Midrash carrying a pitcher on his shoulders. He would say, 'Great is work, as it gives honour to the one who does it.' Rabbi Shimon would carry a basket on his shoulders, and would say, 'Great is work, as it gives honour to the one who does it.'

2. Brakhot 8a

Rabbi Hiyya ben Ammi said in the name of Ulla: Greater is the one who benefits from the work of his hands than one who fears heaven. In regard to the one who fears heaven, it is written "Happy is the man who fears God (Psalms 112)." But in regard to the one who benefits from his own work, it is written "When you eat from the work of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be well with you. (Psalms 128)" "You will be happy" refers to this world; "It will be well with you" refers to the world to come. In regard to the one who fears heaven, the text does not say "it will be well with you." (b. Brakhot 8a)

Discussion Questions:

- Is work more important, less important or of equal importance than/to rest?
- What are Jewish attitudes to work?
- What is Source Two suggesting about the difference between someone who is God-fearing and someone who works?

Employers' obligations

1. Deuteronomy 24:14-15

Do not oppress the hired labourer who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your people or one of the sojourners in your land within your gates. Give him his wages in the daytime, and do not let the sun set on them, for he is poor, and his life depends on them, lest he cry out to God about you, for this will be counted as a sin for you.

2. [Leviticus 19:13]

Do not oppress your neighbour and do not rob him. Do not keep the wages of the worker with you until morning.

3. Nachmanides commentary in Deuteronomy 24: "The text speaks in the present"

"For he is poor--like the majority of hired labourers, and he depends on the wages to buy food by which to live. . . if he does not collect the wages right away as he is leaving work, he will go home, and his wages will remain with you until the morning, and he will die of hunger that night"

4. Jonah Gironi, Sefer HaYirah

Be careful not to afflict a living creature, whether animal or fowl, and even more so not to afflict a human being, who is created in God's image. If you want to hire workers and you find that they are poor, they should become like poor members of your household. You should not disgrace them, for you shall command them respectfully, and should pay their salaries.

Discussion Questions:

- Why is it wrong to keep wages from the poor?
- How does one ensure dignity of all who work for you?
- How do these passages connect to ideas on the Living Wage?
- What's the difference between the biblical imperatives we read and modern day labour rights?

Can we make change?

1. *Bava Metzia 83a*

Some porters working for Raba bar bar Hanan broke a jug of wine. He seized their clothes. They came before Rav, and Rav said to Raba bar bar Hanan, "give them their clothing." Raba bar bar Hanan said to him, "Is this the law?" Rav said, "yes, because of the principle 'you should walk in the ways of the good (Proverbs 2:20).' He gave them back their clothes. They said to him, "we are poor, and we troubled ourselves to work all day and we are needy--do we receive nothing? Immediately, Rav said to Raba bar bar Hanan, "Go, give them their wages." He said to Rav, "Is this the law." Rav said, "yes-- 'you should keep the ways of the righteous (ibid)

2. Maimonides Mishneh Torah, *Shekalim 4:7*

The correctors of books in Jerusalem would take their salaries from [funds collected primarily to cover the cost of sacrifices]. The judges who judged cases of theft in Jerusalem would take their salary from these funds. And how much would they take? Ninety maneh per year; and if this was not enough for them, [those responsible for distributing the money] would increase the amount. Even if [these communal workers] did not want to take more, they would increase the amount according to the needs of the workers, their wives and their families

3. Rabbi Chaim David HaLevy, "Aseh L'Cha Rav"

In order for [these workers] to devote their full energies to their important tasks and in order that they will be able to focus on fulfilling their duties, without concerns about the needs of their families weighing on them.

4. Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "There Shall be No Needy"

"HaLevy also infers from Maimonides that a communal worker's salary should go up as the size of the worker's family increases. A person unable to support his/her family cannot possibly be an effective worker either because of his/her anxiety or—as Talmudic sources suggest—because s/he will find it necessary to take a second job in order to make ends

Discussion Questions:

- In source one: are you with Raba Bar Bar Hanan or the Rav?
- How does one keep the ways of the righteous?
- How do we ensure wages are fair?
- What is an appropriate Liberal Jewish response to the Living Wage Campaign?