

Shoftim – Fabrangen, 8/30/2025

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So today we're participating in Labor on the Bimah, a project of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ) since 1998. The idea has been to put "labor" back into Labor Day by engaging our local Jewish communities in a collective conversation around our texts, teachings, and the challenges facing working families today.

Currently in DC, JUFJ is focusing on **Justice for Restaurant Workers**: Hundreds of workers at some of DC's most prominent and lucrative restaurants – including Le Diplomate and Rasika (that hurts) – have been organizing to join UNITE HERE Local 25. These workers have endured months of union-busting from their employers – STARR Restaurants and Knightsbridge Restaurant Group. Workers at these restaurants have made their demands clear and are now calling for a boycott of these restaurants until their unions are recognized. DC, Maryland, and Virginia residents regularly dine at these establishments, and we have an opportunity, across the region, to take action to support STARR and Knightsbridge restaurant workers.

Now back to our parashah. The most explicit statement about worker rights in the Torah is known as *bal talin*, and it comes from next week's parashah -- **Deut.**

24:14–15 (Parashat Ki Teitzei)

"You shall not oppress a hired worker... On that day you shall pay him his wages; the sun shall not set upon it, for he is poor and sets his heart upon it..."

Timely wages, worker dignity, no exploitation. The rabbis in the Talmud developed a large body of work examining the equities and responsibilities of employers and employees based on these verses.

This week's parashah provides some important precepts underlying the strong labor justice stand of our tradition.

First: at the beginning of the parashah comes: "*lo tateh mishpat* / You shall not wrest judgment; you shall not show favoritism; you shall not take a bribe... Justice, justice you shall pursue..."

- Applied to employer-employee relations: an employer who cheats a worker “perverts justice.”

Perhaps a second underpinning comes from the treatment of the Levites – a dependent class of Israelites, whom there is an obligation to sustain. Is it possible to extrapolated from the Levites to landless workers in general?

And finally, the limits placed on the king in Deut. 17 (14-20). The king must not exploit the people’s labor for his own wealth. How much more so should regular employers not exploit workers, one might say.

So there are six restrictions or instructions about a king’s power, and this section really caught my eye this week, in our era of “No Kings.” They start in Deut. 17:15 – see if you agree with me:

1. Must not be a foreigner, must be your “brother” – there’s a nice story about this that Norman told me about, from Sifre Devarim: When (King) Agrippas, the grandson of Herod, who ruled Judea from 41 to 44 CE, would read Torah with the people and they came to this verse, he would burst into tears, because his father was not Jewish. Whereupon all of Israel said to him: "Fear not, Agrippas; you are our brother, you are our brother," (because his mother being Jewish).
2. Horse-related – the rabbis, by the way, considered it okay for a king to build up the military, but not to multiply horses for himself – maybe the equivalent of getting a fancy jet for oneself
3. Wife control – here are rabbis said, 18 is enough, which was the number of wives of King David, maybe; a pointed rebuke to King Solomon’s 1000 wives.
4. Silver and gold control – presumably a leader should not be personally enriching himself with all kinds of currencies
5. Write a scroll and read it day and night – the idea was to write out the book of Deuteronomy and keep it with him at all times -- sort of like a constitution -- and keep consulting it.
6. Neither feel superior nor swerve from the mitzvot – I think of this as an instruction as well. Ramban wrote: “Scripture has thus admonished the king, for whom it is proper to be haughty and majestic, that his *heart* must

be as humble as that of his brethren of lower status, because conceit is a reprehensible character-trait, and it is loathsome to God even in a king. As it says in Proverbs , תוֹעֵבַת הַשָּׁמַיִם כָּל גְּבוּהַ לֵב / every arrogant person is an abomination to the LORD.

There's a beautiful midrash that Norman pointed me to – that the kings of Israel and Judah sat on a throne seven steps high. And when a king such as Solomon ascended each of the six steps toward his throne, a herald announced one of these rules, and a few others from the beginning of the parashah. (Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 1:7

1. **First step:** “He shall not multiply wives to himself.” (Deut 17:17)
2. **Second step:** “He shall not multiply horses to himself.” (Deut 17:16)
3. **Third step:** “Neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.” (Deut 17:17)
4. **Fourth step:** “Thou shalt not judge unfairly.” (Deut 16:19)
5. **Fifth step:** “You shall show no partiality” (Deut 16:19)
6. **Sixth step:** “You shall not take bribes.” (Deut 16:19)

Finally, upon reaching the **seventh step just before sitting on the throne**, the king is reminded: “**Know before whom you are about to sit.**”

So the odd thing is, given this explicit command or permission to set up a monarchy, when the Israelites actually ask for one in the Book of Samuel, not only the prophet Samuel takes umbrage but God does too. As if, we didn't really mean you should actually have a king.

In 1 Samuel 8, when Israel asks the prophet Samuel for a king “like all the nations,” Samuel is displeased, and God tells him: “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them.”

And then Samuel warns the people that a king will take their sons, daughters, land, and produce. Very confusing! Is it that a controlled or controllable king seems okay in theory in Deuteronomy, but in practice Samuel realizes it will

amount to tyranny? Are the people asking because they reject not only Samuel's corrupt sons but God's rule as well? Lots of debate over the centuries.

I want to close with a teaching by Rabbi Shani Rosenbaum writing for T'ruah. She reminds us of the Rosh Hashanah piyyut *Melekh Elyon* (The King Exalted), which captures the distinction between Divine justice and the human perversion of power in kingship:

The King Exalted

Who speaks righteousness, is cloaked in
righteousness, who hears anguished cries:
May He rule forever!

מֶלֶךְ עֶלְיוֹן

הַמְדַבֵּר בְּצִדְקָה הַלּוֹבֵשׁ צְדָקָה הַמְאֲזִין צְעָקָה
לְעַד עַד יְמֵלֶךְ

The King on high, who speaks with justice,
who wears justice, who listens tze'akah, not
tzedakah. Who listens to the cries and
needs of the people.

And then in an undertone, we recite:

מֶלֶךְ אֲבִיוֹן The King of Oppression

Seeks out evil, does evil, is fashioned for sin
How long will he rule?

וְחֹפֵץ בְּרָשָׁע וְעוֹשֶׂה רָשָׁע וּמוֹכֵן לְפָשָׁע
עַד מָתִי יְמֵלֶךְ

The floor is open.