



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Ki Tetze 5773

By Rabbi Joshua Rabin

August 17, 2013

Since 2007, more than 20 workers committed suicide at the Shenzhen, China factory of the Foxconn Corporation, a partner of Apple and major producer of iPhones worldwide.<sup>1</sup> In an article for *Wired Magazine*, Joel Johnson asks whether his incessant desire for the latest gadget contributed to these deaths in a factory that China Labor Watch reports provides overtime and employee amenities, yet is known for grueling hours and intense employee pressure.<sup>2</sup> Johnson writes:

...when that thin, taut cord that connects our consumption to the nameless millions who make our lifestyle possible snaps even for a moment, the gulf we find ourselves peering into—a yawning, endless future of emptiness on a squandered planet—becomes too much to bear. When 17 people take their lives, I ask myself, did I in my desire hurt them? Even just a little? And of course the answer, inevitable and immeasurable as the fluttering silence of our sun, is yes. Just a little.<sup>3</sup>

Johnson's analysis reminds us that many unforeseen costs, or externalities, exist in the production of items that play a major role in our consumerist culture. While we seldom connect the human faces that make our products with the items we purchase in stores, stories like the one at the Foxconn factory require that we demand a certain quality of life for those whose work benefits our lives.

Annie Leonard writes in *The Story of Stuff* about the externalities required to produce the items we own, but generally take for granted. In one example, Leonard describes the environment of the Haitian women who sew logos of the Walt Disney Corporation onto T-shirts. While Disney receives millions of dollars from clothing sales, the women who sewed these shirts "were paid *half of one percent* of the sales price of the garment in the United States," and worked in an environment with intense pressure to produce, regular sexual harassment, and unsafe working conditions.<sup>4</sup> However, the most troubling remark in Leonard's account is that these women are forced to work under those conditions to make apparel for Disney "that they could never save enough to buy."<sup>5</sup>

Whether in China, Haiti or other countries in the developing world, the disconnect between what some are able to purchase and what others are tasked with producing, but are never able to purchase, is antithetical to the relationship between workers and owners outlined in this week's *parashah*. *Parashat Ki Tetze* records a *mitzvah* that reshapes the relationship between workers and owners:

<sup>1</sup> David Barboza, "Group Says Deaths Show Problems Remain at Foxconn," *The New York Times*, 20 May 2013. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/business/global/3-foxconn-employees-are-said-to-have-committed-suicide.html?ref=foxconntechnology>.

<sup>2</sup> "Three Suicides at Zhengzhou Foxconn in Three Days," *China Labor Watch*, 17 May 2013. Available at <http://www.chinalaborwatch.org/news/new-456.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Joel Johnson, "1 Million Workers. 90 Million iPhones. 17 Suicides. Who's to Blame?," *Wired Magazine*, 28 February 2011. Available at [http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/02/ff\\_joelinchina/all/](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/02/ff_joelinchina/all/).

<sup>4</sup> Annie Leonard, *The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession With Stuff Is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health—And a Vision for Change* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

When you enter another man's vineyard, you may eat as many grapes as you want, until you are full, but you must not put any in your vessel. When you enter another man's field of standing grain, you may pluck ears with your hand; but you must not put a sickle to your neighbor's grain.<sup>6</sup>

Clarifying the verse from our *parashah*, the Mishnah states that laborers may eat fruit from the fields where they work.<sup>7</sup> Commenting on the Talmud's discussion of this *mishnah*, Rashi states that the food eaten by the worker is not deducted from his wages, but rather is given as an act of *gemilut hesed* (loving-kindness),<sup>8</sup> implying that workers are not merely entitled to wages, but to a portion of what they harvest. The Talmud's opinion is codified in both the Mishneh Torah<sup>9</sup> and the Shulkhan Arukh,<sup>10</sup> envisioning a world in which the treatment of workers is not based on disconnected concern, but on a universal obligation to promote human welfare and dignity.

When the Foxconn Corporation discovered the suicides in their factory, they installed nets on the factory floor to stop workers from jumping to their deaths,<sup>11</sup> a clear statement that what matters to them is the bottom line, not the lives of their workers. Other global corporations, however, are seeking to promote practices that honor the human dignity of their workers. In response to complaints about working conditions in their subsidiary factories in Vietnam, Unilever, a Dutch-based multinational corporation, commissioned a report by Oxfam International. The report recommended that the corporation understand that providing a minimum wage alone is not an adequate proxy for ensuring quality of life, educate their subsidiaries about how supply chain decisions affect worker morale and modify their risk management system to better accommodate the needs of their most vulnerable workers.<sup>12</sup> While the report criticized the labor practices currently in place in Vietnam, former Oxfam CEO Barbara Stocking also said Unilever's willingness to give Oxfam access was the "most transparent and most forward-thinking example" of a corporation allowing themselves to be evaluated on their commitment to workers' rights.<sup>13</sup>

While our rabbis never imagined a world in which the "crop" of a worker would be an iPhone or a T-shirt from Disneyworld, they knew that it is not enough to provide workers a decent wage. Instead, workers must feel that their employers see them as people whose contributions matters, rather than a replaceable cog in a consumerist cycle. Our task is to heed the message of *Parashat Ki Tetze*, and demand that workers be provided the resources not merely to work for survival, but to work in an atmosphere of dignity, fairness and partnership.



**Rabbi Joshua Rabin** is the Rabbi-in-Residence of the Schechter School of Long Island. He received his Rabbinic Ordination and an MA in Jewish Education from the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he served two terms as student president of the Rabbinical School. Josh is an alumnus of the AJWS Rabbinical Students' Delegation in Muchucuxcah, Mexico in 2011, served as a District Coordinator for AJWS's Reverse Hunger Campaign and ran on AJWS's first New York Marathon Team. Josh lives on the Upper West Side with his wife, Yael, and their daughter, Hannah. You can read more of Josh's writings at [www.joshuarabin.com](http://www.joshuarabin.com). Josh can be reached at [joshua.rabin@gmail.com](mailto:joshua.rabin@gmail.com).

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 23:25-26.

<sup>7</sup> Mishnah Bava Metziah 7:3.

<sup>8</sup> Rashi on "O M'Shel Shamayim," Bava Metziah 92a.

<sup>9</sup> Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Secirut (Laws of Hiring), 12:1.

<sup>10</sup> Shulkhan Arukh Hoshen Mishpat 337:1.

<sup>11</sup> See Footnotes 1 and 3.

<sup>12</sup> Rachel Wilshaw, Liesbeth Unger, Do Quynh Chi, and Pham Thu Thuy, *Labor Rights in Unilever's Supply Chain: From Compliance Towards Good Practice. An Oxfam Study of Labour Issues in Unilever's Operations and Supply Chain* (Oxfam International, 2013), 12-14.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Smedley, "Unilever's labour practices in Vietnam found wanting by Oxfam report," *The Guardian*, 7 February 2013. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/unilever-labour-practices-vietnam-oxfam-report>.

©2013 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit [www.ajws.org/dvartzedek](http://www.ajws.org/dvartzedek).

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org) • [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)