



FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Passover: Slavery, Freedom and Migration

How to Use this Publication

From the Sources is designed to facilitate holiday text study around issues of social justice. We invite you to read the texts and use them in your community to teach and take action. **Use *From the Sources* to:**

- **Learn with others.** Read through this text study together with a friend or a group of friends and discuss the issues it raises.
- **Enrich your own learning.** This resource aims to inspire thought-provoking and challenging perspectives on the holiday texts.
- **Teach.** Invite others to share in this learning. Use it as the basis for a *dvar Torah* or to motivate action in support of advocacy or *tzedakah* initiatives in your school, synagogue or Hillel.

Introduction

Many stories in the Torah illustrate that for as long as people have lived, they have migrated in search of food and work. In Genesis, we read that “there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land” (Genesis 12:10). Isaac also experiences “a famine in the land—aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham—and [thus] Isaac went to Avimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar” (26:1). Finally, at the end of Genesis, Jacob and his sons migrate to Egypt in search of food. Jacob says, “There are rations in Egypt. Go down and procure rations for us there that we may live and not die” (Genesis 42:2). Jacob and his sons soon settle where they find sustenance, in the land of Egypt.

Migration is also a central part of life in modern times. Most North American Jews have ancestral stories of flight from persecution or migration in search of economic opportunity. Violence and economic insecurity continue to drive millions of people all over the world to leave their countries of origin and travel into the unknown. For many, the search for a better life quickly becomes a struggle for survival.



Deuteronomy 26:5-6 (Passover Haggadah)

My ancestor was a fugitive Aramean; he went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there... They persecuted us and imposed hard labor upon us.

דברים פרק כו: ה-ו (הגדה של פסח)

ארמי אבד אבי וירד מצרימה ויגר שם במתי מעט... ויענונו ויתנו עלינו עבדה קשה:

- Share a story from your family's migration history. What caused them to leave their country of origin? What challenges and opportunities did they encounter upon arriving to their new home?
- Why do you think the *haggadah* places so much emphasis on our remembering oppression along with liberation?



Causes of Migration

Today, the majority of the world's migrant workers—an estimated 30 million people—occupy semi-skilled or unskilled positions in the labor force.

“Protecting Migrant Workers in a Globalized World,” Ryszard Cholewinski, Migration Information Source, March 2005, <http://tinyurl.com/2lacfj>

In developed countries' economies, there tend to be more jobs available at the high and low ends of the labor market than in the middle. Available or unemployed national workers are unwilling to fill low-status jobs because of poor pay, dangerous conditions, and the existence of alternative welfare provisions. Given the absence of a willing domestic workforce, rich countries are increasingly looking outside their borders for low-skilled workers in agriculture, food-processing, construction, manufacturing, and low-wage services such as domestic work, home health care, and the sex sector. Migrant workers and irregular migrants from poorer countries have stepped in to fill the demand.

- What does this text suggest are the reasons for migrant workers traveling to developed countries?
- How do these reasons compare and contrast with the reasons for migration cited in the Torah or in your own family's migration stories?
- Did your ancestors experience any discrimination or restriction of their rights in the journey? Given the benefits of migrant workers for host countries, why do you think many countries restrict the number and rights of migrant workers?



Treatment of Migrant Workers

Migrant workers who enter host countries and stay illegally are particularly vulnerable; they are subject to exploitation in working conditions and rates of pay, as well as the threat of imprisonment or deportation.

“Decent Work and Poverty Reduction in the Global Economy,” International Labour Office, April 2000, p.21, <http://tinyurl.com/yonsh2>

“[Migrant workers are] subjected to exploitation in recruitment and employment, to forced labour, to exclusion from social insurance and to the denial of their human rights. These include foreign women in the prostitution traffic, domestic workers deprived of their travel documents, bonded labour in plantations, construction workers in unsafe work and housed in deplorable and unsanitary conditions, and various sorts of undocumented foreign workers in clandestine and grossly underpaid jobs.”

Unlike many other vulnerable groups around the world, migrant workers lack legal protections. Though protections exist, they have not been ratified. The United Nation's International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families (ICMW) has been ratified by a mere 27 countries, none of

them major migrant worker-receiving states. The ICMW seeks to extend human rights to migrant workers, yet many countries are reluctant to recognize such rights, which are often politically unpopular because they limit governments' and business's flexibility to exploit migrant workers. Political leaders also argue that these rights encourage, and even reward, undocumented migrants' violations of national immigration laws.

- Who are some migrant workers with whom you interact directly (e.g., domestic workers, restaurant delivery-workers, food service workers) or indirectly (e.g., agricultural workers)?
- How does their status as migrant workers impact the way you interact with them?



What is to be done?

Beyond widespread ratification of the ICMW, there are many other possible ways to protect the rights of migrant workers.

“Keep the Borders Open,” *The Economist*, 3 Jan 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/38wavr>

History has shown that immigration encourages prosperity. Tens of millions of Europeans who made it to the New World in the 19th and 20th centuries improved their lot, just as the near 40m foreign-born are doing in America today. Many migrants return home with new skills, savings, technology and bright ideas. Remittances to poor countries in 2006 were worth at least \$260 billion—more, in many countries, than aid and foreign investment combined. Letting in migrants does vastly more good for the world's poor than stuffing any number of notes into Oxfam tins... Americans object to the presence of around 12m illegal migrant workers in a country with high rates of legal migration. But given the American economy's reliance on them, it is not just futile but also foolish to build taller fences to keep them out. Better for Congress to resume its efforts to bring such workers out of the shadows, by opening more routes for legal, perhaps temporary, migration, and an amnesty for long-standing, law-abiding workers already in the country. Politicians in rich countries should also be honest about, and quicker to raise spending to deal with the strains that immigrants place on public services.

- What about this argument do you find compelling? What about it is unpersuasive?
- In the context of Passover, how do you imagine the ancient Egyptian public would have responded to an article like this written about the Israelites? How is that reaction similar to or different from what you know of some common American responses to migrant workers?

Deuteronomy 24:14-15

Do not oppress the hired laborer 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.

דברים פרק כד:יד-טו

לא תעשק שכיר עני ואביון מאחיד או מגרד
 ביומו תתן שכרו ולא : אשר בארצך בשעריך
 תבוא עליו השמש כי עני הוא ואליו הוא נשא
 את נפשו ולא יקרא עליך אל ה' והיה בך חטא

- What labor policy does the Torah propose for migrant workers? What changes in American law and practice would be necessary to implement this kind of labor policy?
- What might be the socio-economic and political repercussions of such changes?
- How could you change the way you interact with migrant workers—both directly and indirectly—to put these values into practice?



Who is taking action?

Internationally, AJWS funds grassroots organizations that work to protect the rights of migrant workers. In Burma, for example, AJWS funds the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association (YCOWA). YCOWA was founded in 1999 by Burmese student activists and migrant workers to improve working and living conditions for the 100,000 Burmese migrant workers living near the Thailand-Burma border. YCOWA runs a community center that offers a safe place for Burmese migrant workers to gather, organize and attend workshops on legal processes and labor rights. YCOWA also provides legal aid, security and shelter to workers who are seeking redress for abuse by their employers. In addition, AJWS addresses the root causes of economic migration by fostering sustainable livelihoods and development for communities around the world. AJWS grants strengthen the capacity of grassroots organizations to advance economic and environmental sustainability, promote fair labor standards and raise the social status of women and marginalized communities.

In the United States, many organizations support migrant workers' rights, such as the ACLU and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Domestic Workers United (DWU) is an organization of Caribbean, Latina and African nannies, housekeepers and elderly caregivers in New York that organizes workers to support fair labor standards and combat exploitation and oppression. DWU also provides legal services to workers who have suffered abuse or violations of their rights on the job. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is an organization of mostly Latino, Haitian and Mayan Indian immigrant farm workers fighting for their rights to earn a living wage and to put an end to the continued existence of modern-day slavery in the agricultural industry in the United States.



Conclusion

יִשְׁמַע ה' אֶת קִלְנוּ... וַיּוֹצֵאנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה וּבִמְרָא גָדֹל וּבִאֲתוֹת וּבִמִּפְתָּיִם

God heard our plea... God freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome powers, with signs and with wonders (Deuteronomy 26:7-8).

While God redeemed us from slavery, millions of migrant workers continue to face abuses in the United States and all around the world. The countries that host them, and are willing to exploit their labor without respecting their human rights, are dangerously close to emulating ancient Egypt. Fulfilling the promise of Passover for all people requires that we protect the stranger, particularly those in our midst. Next year, may we all be free.

To access a supplementary resource which provides in-depth analysis on migration, please visit www.ajws.org/fts. For more information on this and other educational resources, please contact us at education@ajws.org. To subscribe to this resource, visit www.ajws.org/fts.

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