

Allyship and Holding One's Own Accountable: The New Jewish Labor Movement

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The Agriprocessors kosher meat scandal in Postville, Iowa, was a watershed moment in American Jewish labor history. The reports of mistreatment of migrant workers that culminated in a federal government raid on the meatpacking plant put a negative spotlight on a familiar and essential contributor to Jewish life—kosher meat production. It called the meaning of kashrut into question and raised the challenge of how (or if) ethical standards should help define kashrut. But just as significantly, it revived a Jewish interest in labor issues, albeit with a new focus on allyship and the willingness to hold one's own accountable..

There is precedent for this focus. Jewish participation in the American labor movement is well known, especially in the garment trades. What is less well known is a Jewish history of allyship among the employer class. These efforts came less from employers themselves than from rabbis and others who promoted social justice in the Reform movement, inspired by the nineteenth-century Protestant Social Gospel movement. The nineteenth-century American Reform movement's efforts included those of individual rabbis, most notably, Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, who wrote and spoke extensively about labor and economic issues, and, during the 1910-11 Chicago men's clothing workers' strike, headed an effort to mediate. Similarly, Rabbi Judah Magnes, the head of the New York Kehillah, played a key role in arbitrating the labor disputes between Jewish workers and employers, and bridging the divide between "uptown" and "downtown" Jews in early twentieth-century New York. The idea that bridged the gap between the Jewish working class and the Jewish employer class was the underlying sense of how a Jew should behave. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis keenly noted this when mediating the 1910 New York garment workers' strike, hearing a worker shout at one factory owner: "You should be ashamed! Is

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this worthy of a Jew?" This consciousness would filter back into the Jewish community, inspiring Jews to hold their own accountable when it came to labor issues in Jewish institutions, most notably during the struggles of religious school teachers over issues ranging from pay to rights of religious observance.

There are many similarities between contemporary Jewish allyship with workers and earlier efforts, but also notable differences. The key similarities include the role of Jewish religious leaders who have taken their message beyond their institutions and communities to bring awareness to the larger world. A notable example is Rabbi Morris Allen, the founder of Hechsher (later Magen) Tzedek, an ethical certifying organization for kosher food producers. What also remains constant is the invocation of religious principles, by way of demonstrating that concern for workers and workers' rights is more than the province of socialist or other leftist politics. This has included finding grounding in the sources, and in many cases, downplaying secular political focuses, except to illustrate contemporary realities about work that confirm (or demonstrate the limits of) ideas presented in the texts. There has also been, in many cases, the reality of the ongoing tension between social justice and communal order, which has meant working within the limits of Jewish communal power structures.

Even with these similarities, however, there are also salient differences. The most notable is that in contrast to a past common Jewish worker identity, the current assumption is a middle-/employer-class identity for most American Jews, heralding the shift to an emphasis on

allyship. Just as significant is the new reality of Jews as employers of non-Jewish workers, many of color, which gives the classic question of “how a Jew should behave” a new valence. Another factor that is not unprecedented, but more prominent than in times past, is the paradoxical roles of Orthodoxy. On the one hand, the growing political conservatism of Orthodox Jewry, which was not as significant a factor in the past, has become an additional source of tension between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, especially over the issue of whether labor violations by Jewish employers cause antisemitism or talking about them does. The Postville scandal has also inspired Orthodox pushback against the question of how ethics (and whose ethics) should shape Jewish law. Yet there is also the visible Orthodox participation in labor-related protest, mainly from within Open Orthodoxy.

Beyond actions, though, the biggest change may be found in the theological underpinnings of the new Jewish labor justice movement. While the prophets are still invoked, as are the appropriate texts in the five books of the Torah, there is also an unprecedented use of talmudic and rabbinic sources to buttress the Jewish case for justice in the workplace. One of the most prominent activists in this regard, Rabbi Jill Jacobs, has highlighted her own effort to bring a more solidly textual basis to Jewish labor (and general social justice) activism, beyond the often vaguely defined Tikkun Olam, arguing that “reducing the Jewish voice to a general call for justice or vague references to the past deprives the public debate of the texture that a more specific look at Jewish text and experience might contribute.” Her efforts and those of others have influenced the development of newer Jewish labor-focused organizations—and the direction of old ones. The former includes religious-based efforts to incorporate ethics into kosher certification—the Conservative Movement’s Hechsher/Magen Tzedek, and the somewhat more successful Uri L’Tzedek, the Orthodox social justice organization, each trying to maintain its own balance between rewarding ethical practices and avoiding fusion with traditional kosher certification. More of moment, however, has been the changing emphases of the venerable Jewish Labor Committee. Founded in the 1930s by Jewish trade unionists, over the decades it has morphed in purpose from being primarily a labor



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federation to a labor support group. In addition, the traditionally socialist-oriented JLC has in recent times put out education material emphasizing prolabor biblical and rabbinic sources. All these developments show the possibility for workers’ rights to remain a mainstream Jewish concern, at a time when such consciousness is especially needed.

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