

## TEXTS

See Workers Rights Living Talmud pdf.

## SERMONS AND SPEECHES

**Rabbi Renee Bauer**

**Director, Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice**

**Invocation at the State Capitol: Madison, WI**

**February 17, 2011**

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**For additional resources: [www.workerjustice.org](http://www.workerjustice.org)**

Good Morning. My name is Renee Bauer. I am a rabbi and the Director of the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice of South Central Wisconsin.

Today is day three of our rallying. Day three is an auspicious day. It is the only day that God, in the story of creation, twice said "this is good."

What I see before me on day three is good. I can say that twice. This is good!

It is good that we are here, growing in our numbers, speaking out against Governor Walker's bill that is an affront to the human dignity of public sector workers.

The great rabbi Hillel said two millennia ago:

"If I am not for myself who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?"

If I am not for myself who will be for me?

Public sector workers – teachers, sanitation workers, nurses, bus drivers – you are here speaking for your rights. You are no longer depending on elected officials to protect your rights. You stand here to demand your rights to organize, to bargain and to be treated with respect.

If I am only for myself what am I?

But it is not only the unions and public sector employees that gather today. Religious leaders, private sector employees, friends, students, neighbors, patients and of course the fire fighters who are exempt from the bill all stand here with you. We all know that justice for one is justice for all and that we must stand together to win this battle.

If not now when?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King proclaimed at the 1968 sanitation workers strike in Memphis, TN in one of the last speeches of his life, "Now is the time. Get the word across to everybody in power in this town that now is the time to make real the promises of democracy."

Now is the time! Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy. Now is the time for those in the capitol to hear the voice of the people. Now is the time to end the attack on workers. Now is the time for justice and fairness to reign. May this be God's will. Amen.

**Rabbi Bonnie Margulis**  
**Rally for Workers Rights - Wisconsin State Capitol**  
**February 18, 2011**  
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Shalom, Wisconsin! I am Rabbi Bonnie Margulis, Immediate Past Chair of the Wisconsin Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and I am here today to bring a message from the pro-choice faith community – we stand in solidarity with our union brothers and sisters! As faithful advocates for reproductive justice, we know that it was the power of collective bargaining that brought justice to the workplace; that gave workers access to a fair wage, to health care including reproductive health care, to sick leave and child care benefits, and to a secure retirement. These are necessities if we are to build healthy families and a productive work force here in Wisconsin and that is why the religious reproductive justice community stands today to speak out for working men, women, and families!

I also speak today as a Rabbi of the Reform Movement of Judaism, the largest Jewish movement in the United States. Judaism has long been an advocate for workers' rights, beginning with the book of Deuteronomy (24:14-15), which tells us "Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, ....15 Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. ..." The Reform Movement has stood together with the unions since the earliest days. In 1948 a resolution of the Union for Reform Judaism said of the struggles for organized labor, "We rejoice in the gains that labor has made in the past generation and hope that they will be retained. We urge that abuses in labor and management will be remedied." How sad it is that those gains are being threatened today, and we are still fighting these same battles that we fought over sixty years ago!

I'd like to share with you the words of Pastor Martin Niemoller, who also fought against injustice over sixty years ago. His words then are chillingly appropriate to today:

First they came for the communists,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me  
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Today the people of Wisconsin are standing together, speaking out for each other, speaking out for the workers, speaking out for families, and speaking out for the Unions. As long as we all continue to stand together in solidarity, justice will prevail!

**Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman**  
**Congregation Shaarei Shamayim; Madison, WI**  
**Bar Mitzvah Talk and Aliyah, February 19**  
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Eli, your bar mitzvah falls at both a terrible and an extraordinary time in the history of our state. This past week we watched our state government, led by Governor Walker, try to destroy labor unions right before our eyes. We watched as new legislation was introduced that targets and demonizes workers, jeopardizes the livelihood of teachers and childcare workers, and harms so many beloved institutions in our state.

You have spent the last several months preparing for your bar mitzvah, immersing yourself in the more technical aspects of Jewish practice – how to read Hebrew, how to lead a service, how to chant a Torah portion, and how to read a Jewish text. We ask bar mitzvah students to do this because it is one foundation of Jewish practice.

Yet there is another foundation of Jewish practice, one that you, as well as many members of our community, have participated in over these last several days – it is the practice of loving your neighbor as yourself, of taking to the streets and to the capitol rotunda, of committing ourselves anew to protecting the very fabric of our society. It is the practice of tikkun olam, of repair of the world, of fighting for social justice. This is what it means to be an adult in the eyes of the Jewish community.

These practices are based on the strong belief that the growing economic inequality in our society is an affront to Jewish values. Jewish authorities throughout history have argued that the Torah's insistence on worker justice is not just an ideal but also a legal and ethical obligation – including paying workers a living wage and, in modern times, supporting the right of workers to unionize.

Eli, as you enter into your teenage years, I hope that you will derive inspiration from Jewish tradition – from these religious texts that oblige us to work for economic justice, from our secular history of involvement in the American labor movement, fighting for the rights of all workers, and from the commitment to building communities that support and nourish the lives of the elderly, of children, of the sick and the vulnerable among us.

As you enter into your teenage years, may you find your unique expression and engage in the work of your community. As we learn in an ancient Jewish text, “It is not up to you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” (Pirkei Avot)

Special Aliyah for all those who participated in any of the many protests, vigils, or hearings at the State Capitol this week. [90% of the congregation and guests came up for the aliyah.]

Mi sheberach Avoteynu Avraham, Yitzhak, v'Ya'akov  
May the One who blessed our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,

V'Imoteynu Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, v'Leah  
And our foremothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah,

Bless all of you who have come up to the Torah this morning.

No matter what happens in the next week may you be reminded that even tiny actions can affect others, create ripple effects, and make a difference in our world.

May you take responsibility for what you say, for how you behave, for what you do and for what you do not do.

May you pursue justice, act with integrity, and work hard to create a society where all are cared for, where every person has the resources that he or she needs.

May you remember to take care of yourselves and your families so that your work is sustainable.

And may you heed the words of Pirke Avot – If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

And let us say, Amen.

**Rabbi Andrea Steinberger**

**Dvar Torah on Ki Tissa: Leadership of the Heart and Mind**

**UW Hillel and Capitol Lakes Retirement Center**

**February 19, 2011**

**Contact information: [asteinberger@uwhillel.org](mailto:asteinberger@uwhillel.org), 608-256-8361**

This week's Torah portion, which usually seems a bit distant and old-fashioned, is resonating with me today. It speaks of major clashes between the people and their leaders. Forty days after arriving at Mount Sinai, forty days after seeing the voices and hearing the shofar, the Jewish people danced around a golden calf. They could not wait for Moses to get down from the mountain. They could not bear to remain without a leader. "And when the people saw that Moses did not come down from the mountain, the people congregated around Aaron and said to him, "Get up, make us gods which shall go before us; for this man Moses that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him"" (Exodus 32:1).

The main question I am considering today is this: what is the correct response of a leader to the demands of their people?

Aaron and Moses provide two very different models of response. Moses' brother, Aaron, is thrust directly into the dilemma of responding to the demand to "make us gods." Without a moment of hesitation or a word of protest, Aaron directs the Jews to "break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives and sons and daughters and bring them to me." (Exodus 32:4) The people make a golden calf and Aaron announces that "tomorrow is a holiday of God" (Exodus 32:5). Why did Aaron acquiesce so readily to the demands of the people? Unlike Moses, Aaron always coexisted with the people. He was a slave alongside them. He stayed with them while Moses went up the mountain. The people didn't know how long Moses would be away. They were very vulnerable. They could not cope without a leader.

Jewish tradition is split on whether Aaron was a good leader for listening to the people and giving into their demands. Later in the Torah we read that God was very angry with Aaron (Deuteronomy 9:20). But the mishnah states that we should all strive to be like the students of Aaron, loving and pursuing peace.” Aaron is regarded as the prototype of love and compassion for others.

Moses, however, has not shared the experience of slavery with his people. He grew up as a prince in Pharaoh’s palace and then as a shepherd in the desert. Now he has been in solitude for 40 days on the mountain. Moses comes down from the mountain and gets angry at the people for what they have done, for the chaos they have caused. He does not tolerate a minute of concession to the needs of the people. His first response is to break the tablets of the commandments and punish the people for their demands.

In this parasha we see two responses: Aaron responds by accepting human limitations and expressing his love for the people. Moses acts apart from their reality, he teaches truth to the people. Aaron responds from his heart; Moses from his mind. Both are centers of life, both the heart and the mind are centers of wisdom.

This week we have seen protests in our state capitol over labor laws and budget deficits. We continue to watch the worldwide protests in favor of democracy in Egypt, Iran, and Yemen. May our own leaders of Wisconsin, of our nation, of our neighboring nations respond to the needs of us people with both their hearts and their minds. May they use wisdom in their response to the needs of the people. May they be like Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it. May they be like Moses, speaking the truth and teaching the people. May peace and contentment come soon.

**Statement of Rabbi Jonathan Biatch, Madison, Wisconsin  
February 21, 2011**

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**For additional resources: [www.rjrblog.blogspot.com](http://www.rjrblog.blogspot.com)**

Good afternoon, brave friends. I am Jonathan Biatch, a Rabbi serving a Reform Jewish congregation in Madison, Wisconsin, and a member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. This organization, and the movement of which I am a member, has, for more than 90 years supported progressive rights of the American worker.

In 1918, we began to recognize and champion the rights of American workers to bargain collectively.

In 1940, we supported the National Labor Relations Act as a way to achieve economic democracy.

In 1947, we called upon states, employers, and labor unions to embrace a fair process of discussion and negotiation, rather than imposing legislation, in establishing union contracts.

And as early as 1999, we called upon federal, state, county, and municipal governments to establish a living wage, in order to raise working families' income above the poverty line.

As Jews, we are heirs of a biblical and prophetic tradition that has sought to perfect the world that God gave us, and we believe still in making real the demands of the books of the Hebrew bible that are thousands of years old – yet still are relevant the rights of workers in our day.

The laws of the Bible call upon employers to be fair and honest in their relationships with their employees. They say, “You shall not defraud your fellow...Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.” And “Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy...Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it.”

From these laws, Judaism derives the following beliefs:

- that a wage must be sufficient to bring dignity to the worker;
- that workers in similar professions may band together for various purposes;
- that such organizations may and should bargain collectively to establish uniform salaries for similar work and safe working conditions;
- that there must be days of rest among days of labor;
- that employers not abuse children who were, at one time, forced to work and not attend school;
- and that laborers are to work hard, both for their own self-improvement and to strengthen society.

Judaism is not the only faith tradition that supports the rights of the workers. A Papal Encyclical written over a century ago warned that the owners of production must not ignore the inherent, divine dignity of every worker, and that the welfare of workers and their families could not be left to the vagaries of the market place.

Therefore, Wisconsin people of faith believe, and want our elected representatives to hear:

- that it is morally right and proper to sit and talk across the table with laborers whose lives they wish to affect;
- that this is the way to bring people the dignity; they deserve
- and that any other approach is immoral and repugnant.

My friends: The fact that we have come out to this rally in this weather speaks volumes about our commitment to one another, and the values for which we struggle. For WE know that regardless of the counterfeit claims of those who support Governor Walker's proposals, the working class and the unionized workers are not the ones who caused the deficit in our state, and should not be penalized for their simple desire to bargain collectively for the benefit of all.

We therefore move truly forward today, the direction of the motto of our state. We learn in Jewish tradition, “Great is labor for it gives honor to the laborer”. May we all be honored and dignified through your work today.

**STORY**

## **Worker Justice and Ethical Kashrut** by Rabbi Bonnie Margulis

Once it happened, as Passover neared, that Rabbi Israel Salanter (founder of the Jewish *Musar* (ethics) Movement) came to a matzah factory to judge its fitness to receive a kosher certificate. Without that certificate, the matzah factory would be out of business. The owner of the factory wasn't worried, however. He was certain his factory would be certified kosher for Passover. He had instituted new protocols of efficiency that he was sure would impress Rabbi Salanter. Rabbi Salanter came in and observed the process in action. When the matzah was finished and the owner proudly presented it to Rabbi Salanter, the rabbi told the owner the matzah could not be certified as kosher. The owner was shocked. "Why, what's wrong with my matzah?" Rabbi Salanter replied, "The matzah has blood in it, and nothing with blood in it can be certified kosher." "Blood? There's no blood in my matzah!" exclaimed the factory owner. "The way you press your workers and the demands you place on them to be ever more 'efficient' in their work, shows that their blood is in every piece of matzah they produce, and therefore I cannot consider this matzah kosher."

Workers' rights and welfare has always been paramount in Jewish law and ethics. From safety issues, to fair working hours, to living wages, to being treated with dignity and respect, all these are integral to the ethical underpinnings of Jewish law on how we treat our workers. Last week, (the week of March 16) Jews around the world read the Torah portion in Leviticus that lists the animals that are considered kosher and those that are considered *treyf* (unkosher). Today many Jews still follow those ancient laws of *kashrut*, keeping kosher. Others look to the kosher laws and imbue them with new meaning – **ethical kashrut**. For some, this means eating vegetarian or vegan. For some it means eating locally. For some it means eating organic. And for many Jews today, ethical kashrut includes paying attention to who grows our food, who picks our crops, who works in our food factories. It means caring about farm and food industry workers being treated fairly, making a fair wage, working in safe conditions, and being able to support their families in dignity.

Today our state, and our country, is facing a situation where economic injustice is rampant. CEO's make wages hundreds of times greater than their workers. Low-income workers are forced to work two or three jobs just to make ends meet. Food stamps and unemployment benefits are cut just when people need them most. As we approach this Passover, as Jews all over meditate on the meanings of slavery and freedom, of having enough to eat or not having enough, let us all pledge to work together to build a fairer, more just, and more equitable society.

Rabbi Bonnie Margulis  
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