JUDAISM AND LABOR
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – AUG 29, 2014

1. One of the major differences I have noticed in coming to Canada from the US is how seriously Canadian take their holidays
    a. Took boys to the Centitaf for Remembrance Day – solemn
    b. Watched the July 1 Parade in Richmond – big deal
    c. Even Boxing Day – which I had no idea what that was, but my credit card figured it out.

2. **This Monday is Labor Day**, after you fire up the BBQ or put on that white outfit for the last time this summer, you might also want to shine up your shabbat candlesticks, as a day honoring labor is a very Jewish day.

3. There is a temptation to justify every effort of social conscience by a verse from the beginning of next week's Torah Portion, Parshat Shofetim (Deut. 16:20). Rabbi David Saperstein calls it the "Justice, justice you shall pursue rationale", that is, "We are commanded to pursue justice, therefore, we must...(insert your favorite cause here)."
    a. **BUT** when it comes to supporting fair labor practices, no such manipulation of text is necessary.

4. The Torah is a document written to defend the human rights of the worker.
    a. In Exodus, the commandment to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest is preceded by the phrase
        i. "Six days you shall do work," which is interpreted to mean that "… just as Israel was given the positive commandment of Shabbat, so were we given the commandment of working."
            1. Both work and rest from work are considered sacred.
    b. In Psalm 128, this is stated succinctly: "when you shall eat the labor of your hands, you will be happy and it shall be well with you,"

5. The Talmud comments 'You shall be happy in this world and it shall be well with you in the next world,'

a. Labor is an ethical commandment even apart from its practical value.

6. The Jewish celebration of work stood in sharp contrast to other views in the ancient world.
    a. Both the ancient Greeks and ancient Romans looked down on labor
        i. Freedom from work was considered a right of rank and privilege.
        ii. According to Aristotle, "Labor *stupefies* both mind and body and deprives man of his natural dignity... The title of citizen belongs only to those who need not work to live."
        iii. In reaction, Jewish scholars of the day countered: "Love labor, hate mastery and stay away form the ruling powers."

7. **Jews love work, Jews value work.**
    a. Work is dignity
    b. Work is liberation from oppression
    c. Work is Holy

8. **<u>That is</u> – when work <u>is work and not a form of slavery</u>**

9. The Haggadah reminds up every year, “You were once slaves in the land of Egypt.”
    a. What was the burden of slavery?
        i. Work without dignity
        ii. Work that was oppressive
        iii. Work without sacred purpose, that is profane is all respects.
    b. Why are we reminded of this?
        i. Because we have to be ever watchful that we don’t become slaves ourselves or taskmasters to others.

10. A legacy of support for worker rights is an imperative in the Torah and later Rabbinic writings.
    a. Many of the Talmudic era rabbis had names like Yohannan the Shoemaker and Yitzchak the Blacksmith, Shaky the Mohel
        i. *I made that last one up*

b. They knew the value of labor and had firsthand experience dealing with fairness in their workplaces
    i. Wages are to be paid at the end of a day's work, and in money, not in goods, and an employer cannot make his laborers work outside of the agreed working hours.
    ii. Landowners are commanded to share their bounty, in the Biblical commandment to leave the gleanings from the "corners" of their fields for the poor.
    iii. Employers are commanded to act justly in their treatment of those they temporarily "own," or hire. To follow the intention of the law if the letter of the law does not suffice.

11. Labor Law is one of the few places in Jewish law where intent overrules the written word.

12. A story from the Talmud
    a. Some worker [negligently] broke a barrel of wine belonging to Rabbah son of R. Huna. Thereupon he seized their garments; so they went and complained to Rav.

    "Return them their garments," he ordered. "Is that the law?" he inquired. "Even if it isn't it should be," he rejoined.

    Their garments having been returned, they observed "We are poor men, have worked all day, and are in need: are we to get nothing?"

    "Go and pay them," Rav ordered. "Is that the law?" he asked. "Even if it isn't it should be," was his reply.

13. Labor Day is not just about the act of labor,
    a. Its not just a celebration of work, but rather a serious acknowledgment of the historical imbalance between management and labor and the great strides labor unions have made to insure dignity and fairness for those who by the work of their hands our nation endures.

14. And that work is not done.

a. We look around our cities and we see that the ideal has not been met.
    i. Vancouver is an expensive city, it takes two incomes and a rich uncle to buy a home.
    ii. The real living wage is more than $20 per hour.
    iii. BC's child-poverty rate is 18.6%, the highest in Canada
    iv. 32% of poor children in BC – 44,500 children – live in families with at least one adult working full-time, year-round

15. But who is responsible?

a. One answer is at the end of next week's Torah portion with which I began—Shofetim—discussing not labor, but, of all things, murder.
b. The discussion concerns the discovery of a murder victim in the fields between two cities. With no evidence at hand, it might be possible for people to throw up their hands in all innocence, decry the crime and go on with their lives.

    But Torah demands instead that the leaders of the nearest city, representing all of the residents, go through a complex ritual assuming responsibility for the crime and seeking God's forgiveness. Presumably, they will be inspired to take steps to ensure the safety of residents and strangers alike so that their regret will not be hollow.
c. Rabbi Jack Moline observes [that], 'workers are most often victimized not in fields between **cities**, but in the netherworld between competing **interests**, decentralized corporations and geographically scattered investors. With no one at hand to take responsibility for low wages or inadequate benefits, we might reasonably throw up our hands in all innocence, decry the crime and go on with our lives."

16. Until we take responsibility for our neighbors and strangers alike, seeking for them the protections from this anonymous neglect, we have not fulfilled the mandate of Torah. We all know that not every worker is righteous and not every employer is evil—and vice versa.
    a. **But** we who live in privilege know the lengths to which we go to provide for ourselves and the ones we love. We hope to be rewarded for our

effort and intention, fairly and adequately, whether we meet an ideal of righteousness or not.

17. Gathered here as we are to offer thanks for God's blessings on Shabbat, we earn those blessings by pursuing a just society in which all people can depend on the dignity of their work as a reflection of the purpose for which they were created.

18. In a time when Jews have become managers, professionals and entrepreneurs, it's easy to forget that many Jewish families and families of every background came to these shores as our grandparents did seeking a better life, a livable wage and an opportunity. They form the backbone of our city and our nation. We have and continue to benefit from the work of labor unions, many led and organized by Jews who put to work the words of Torah.
    a. And it is easier still to think that the work is now done.
    b. ***Tzedek, Tzedek T'rodf*** – Justice, Justice you shall persue. The word Justice is repeated to remind us that our pursuit of justice is never done.
    c. From that work, from that labor there is no day of rest.