The Volkswagen as a Temple
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

A few months ago I was given a gift that I didn't quite know what to do with. Someone, not a member of our temple, gave me a mezuzah for my car. I wrote a thank you note, thanking them for the unique and thoughtful gift and have spent the last few weeks pondering that mezuzah and just what to do with it.

Deleted: Great sermon - I cut out two pages for you and it is still tight. My only other suggestion is to give examples for the three problems you raise about the strike and lock out. Instead of explaining it, show it. Like: John, a check out clerk, making ……describe the problem in personal terms.¶
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I never really thought of myself as the mezuzah on your car kinda Jew, and given that I drive a Volkswagen (much to my mother's consternation, a bit of my own) I am not so sure my car is the one to begin the trend with anyway. Nevertheless I can't get this object out of my head and while driving it occurred to me, in what ways is my car, Volkswagen or not a sacred place deserving of a mezuzah?

A few months ago I wrote an article for the cover of the Judean where I explained that I pray in my car when I see a fire truck, police car or ambulance speeding to someone's aid. Like in Temple I do a lot of deep thinking and reflection in my car, particularly while inching over the Sepulveda pass. But I soon realized that what makes my car a scared place, is that like our sanctuary my car is surrounded on all sides by windows, as I drive through the streets of our community, encased in my air-conditioned protective bubble, traveling from neighborhoods I shop in to neighborhoods I am sacred to stop in, I am a witness to the world around me.

R. Hiyya b. Abba taught in the Talmud that one should always pray in a room with windows. "Why?" his students asked." "Because" he answered, "what purpose are prayers offered up to heaven if one is not aware of the needs of the world around him while he prays?" Prayers are not devoid of reality, they are recited to change reality.

As I drive around our community, for the past 100 days one sight has continually appeared in my car window, it has been in all of our windows, that of grocery workers walking picket lines in front of our neighborhood super markets. For more than 100 days they have been standing on our street corners with signs and banners, I have driven by, I have honked my horn, I have respected their lines, I have even brought them bagels and doughnuts, but what I haven't done, what we haven't done here in our temple is talked about it. For 100 days 70,000 people in our community have been out of work, with little hope of return even to the negotiating table and aside from bagels and a few toots of my horn I have been silent.

So tonight briefly I want to share with you why this is a Jewish issue, why this is an issue for Temple Judea and what Judaism demands that we do so that the prayers that we offer in this sanctuary for peace and wholeness and dignity and justice in the world are not empty prayers but directed toward heaven and towards our streets with a degree of purpose and conviction.

Several Jewish texts seem relevant to me on this issue.

First is the Holiness Code's injunction not to stand idly by while our neighbor bleeds, which imposes an affirmative obligation to aid a person whose life or health is endangered. The rabbinic literature also makes clear that the obligation to guard health is not only on physicians and patients, but on the whole community.

In a second set of texts, the Torah commands employers not to withhold an employee's wages even overnight or to otherwise exploit a needy worker. The Talmud raises the stakes by stating that a person who withholds an employee's wages is as though he deprived the employee of his very life, and makes the duty to ensure fair worker compensation a societal obligation. And a midrash shows how compelling is the communal stake in preventing exploitation of workers by arguing that the destruction of the biblical Temple in Jerusalem was caused by employers dealing oppressively in the matter of the wages of their hired workers.

All this points to a Jewish duty to study the supermarket labor dispute and decide whether the actions of the supermarkets are fair and reasonable, or whether they endanger their workers' health, are exploitative, or constitute the withholding of wages. After much study, I personally conclude that the supermarkets are being exploitative, both by locking out workers and by demanding that the workers agree to an unfair contract, and it follows that I have a duty as a faithful Jew to support the locked out workers and strikers, and as a Rabbi to share that view with my congregation and urge you to do the same.

Consider for a moment the story of Bill. Bill is a community college graduate who

works as a bagger at Ralphs on Ventura here in Tarzana. He's 26 years old, and goes ot school at night at a technical college learning computer programming. He has been bagging groceries at Ralphs for 2 years, or at least he was until the market locked him out of his job. Bill's not on strike, he's a member of the union and agrees with the grievances of his colleagues at the other stores, but Bill wants to work, but because his employer Ralphs is in collusion with the other markets to break the union, they have locked bill and 49,000 other non-striking union employees out of there job to punish those of other chains who have gone on strike. Using a lockout as a strategic move against the Union indicates an employer's total lack of concern about the welfare of its workers and to me rises to the level of exploiting workers and withholding wages. Not all markets have made that choice: Gelson's for example, is not only ***not*** locking out its own employees who are members of the same union, but is also employing some of the locked out workers to help them survive – on condition that they also spend their allotted time on the picket lines!

Another issue and the most alarming in terms of Jewish business ethics is the supermarkets' insistence that the Union agree to a "two-tier" system under which future employees will receive much lower wages and benefits than current workers. Such a system demands that the Union members sell out their future brother and sister workers. This is antithetical to everything unions stand for, for they follow the rule of mutual responsibility like our own Jewish concept of ***kol Yisrael arevin ze baze*** (all of Israel is responsible for one another). Also, the two-tier system endangers the jobs of the current workers by giving the supermarkets a very strong financial incentive to get rid of their

long-term loyal employees and hire cheaper labor to replace them. It seems to me likely that the supermarkets are demanding this impossible concession in order to ensure that no agreement can be reached. If so, this would be the very opposite of bargaining in good faith and also rises to the level of exploitation and attempt to withhold fair wages.

The biggest issue, and the most complicated, is health care benefits. Consider the story of Joan a checker at Vons. Joan is my preferred checker at Vons, I like going through her line because she comments on everything I buy, oh those are good, or mmm, gotta get me some of those. Once when I bought Gefilta fish, I had to explain to her exactly what a gefilte was, no you can catch it I said. Joan has family medical, Vons pays 80% she pays 20%. Joan's on strike, because in the new contract Vons is proposing that the numbers be reversed, the employee will pay 80% and Vons 20% for a policy that doesn't cover much of what Joan is covered for now.

Notwithstanding the supermarkets' full-page ads suggesting that the workers are demanding to have their medical benefits fully paid by the markets, the workers have already been sharing the financial burden through co-payments and were ready to and offered to assume a greater share of that burden. Second, the extent to which the supermarkets want to shift the expense of medical coverage to the employees will make medical coverage unaffordable to many, perhaps most. It's not just paying a small portion of the premiums, as the ads claim, but a combination of escalating premium payments, new deductibles, and much larger co-payments. According to Union calculations, workers would have to pay between six times and a staggering 41 times as

much as they now pay to maintain coverage, and even so would still not maintain the same level of coverage, they would no longer be covered for well baby programs, chemo therapy or mammograms, among many other treatments that the offered plan does not cover. The supermarkets simply want to cap their own contributions and leave the entire risk of rising health care costs on the shoulders of workers who demonstrably cannot afford it. This seems tantamount to deliberately endangering the health of the workers if the employers could do better.

The supermarkets want the public to believe that they cannot afford to do better than this, but they haven't brought proof of this claim either to the negotiating table or to the public. Indeed, the public records available on line show the markets have been earning bigger and bigger profits from year to year, at least through 2001. The markets argue that they have to cut costs to prepare to compete with Wal-Mart, whose workers are already subject to non-living wage jobs.

The very nature of lockouts and strikes is that the public has to choose whom to support. I think my duty as a Jew is to support the locked out and striking workers. For 100 days I have been honking my horn and shopping else where but 70,000 people are still out of work, more is required of me, more is required of all of us. The only hope these 70,000 individuals and there families have is if we lend our voice to their's. The markets have clearly turned a deaf ear to the pleas of their employees, but they will not close there ears to the insistent call for Justice by their customers. And so we must use more than our

horn and our silent absence from the stores, we must use our voices and our political/economic power as well.

These are the commitments that I hereby undertake and I urge you to take them with me:

1) to tell the supermarkets in person and by filling out the response card available at the Tikkun Olam Table that I will not cross picket lines while they are treating their workers unfairly, but reassure them that when they make ***teshuvah*** and return to their former righteous path of negotiating a fair contract, I pledge to patronize them rather than the exploitative chains they claim to fear;

2) to offer locked out and striking workers moral and practical support whenever possible, by bringing them food and water and offering prayers when I can, and by honking my support in between times; and

3) to share my opinions whenever possible, with my co-workers, friends and family, so that we no longer drive by in silent support but rise up in loud protest of the injustice being done in our community.

4) Attend a rally in support of the striking and locked out works Tuesday morning at 9a at the Vons on Ventura near the 101 and the 405. There a collation of clergy will be caravanning up to San Francisco to meet argue these issues to the CEOs of Von, Albertsons and Ralphs.

Any spot you stand in even a car is worthy of a mezuzah as long as holiness and justice take place there. Let us turn our cars into sanctuaries, not one of stained glass windows that give world a rosey hue, but where a vision of clarity and the suffering of our neighbors confronts and confounds our sense and sensibilities. God redeemed us from our own bondage and we promised as we do every seder to never forget that we were once slaves in the land as well. Therefore our duty as Jews as members of this community is to be agents of redemption in the world. May we all take seriously our obligations to study, to decide, and to act. Amen.