

Daniel Kirzane
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Parashat Shoftim

Labor and Justice: A Jewish (and a KAM) Tradition

Jacob Weinstein served as KAM's rabbi from 1939 until 1967. World War II, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and the movement for Civil Rights provided the backdrop for his spiritual leadership of our congregation. A civic-minded leader with a penchant for political action, Rabbi Weinstein not only commented on affairs of the day; he also participated in them.

Among Rabbi Weinstein's strongest passions was fair labor policy and practice. During the war, Rabbi Weinstein served the National War Labor Board as one of three members on numerous arbitration panels convened to settle labor disputes. The director of the Midwest region's division of disputes wrote to Rabbi Weinstein, "You have shown great skill in getting the parties to see their common ground. ... You always had a firm grasp of the larger over-all program of the National War Labor Board as well as a keen knowledge of the specific issues that came before you."¹

Weinstein's capacity to understand all sides of a dispute and help parties resolve their conflict was essential to his success as rabbi and as a public servant. In 1961 President Kennedy appointed Rabbi Weinstein to the business advisory committee of the Department of Commerce and to the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity.² In all of these areas, Rabbi Weinstein sought to promote justice through the democratic system he admired and loved.

The Jewish view of economic justice, as this week's Torah portion reminds us, relies both on national leaders like Weinstein as well as ordinary citizens like the members of his community who called him Rabbi. In this week's *parashah*, we read the famous imperative *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deut. 16:20). Why is the word "justice" repeated? The 14th century sage Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (Baal Haturim) teaches that the first *tzedek* means קָצֵץ טָעַם מִשְׁעָם דָּבָר שָׁפֵשׁ, "The whole people shall render fair judgments" and the second *tzedek* addresses the appointed officials (commentary *ad loc*). In other words, both our leaders as well as the general population are responsible for rendering justice and fairness in our society.

Rabbi Weinstein took seriously his opportunity to champion economic justice in his support of labor causes in the Midwest, and he sought to inspire the general population to do the same. In 1945, he wrote that an "urgent and long-range activity for Jews (as indeed for all alert socially conscious citizens)" was "transforming our so-called free enterprise private economy into a system viable enough to provide first the

¹ Quoted in Janice Feldstein's *Rabbi Jacob J. Weinstein: Advocate of the People* (KTAV 1980), p. 138.

² This sentence comes from his obituary in *The New York Times*, available:
<https://www.nytimes.com/1974/11/03/archives/rabbi-jacob-weinstein-is-dead-led-oldest-illinois-congregation.html>

security and then the abundance which our material resources, machine tools, and industrial skills can make possible.”³

So this weekend, as we mark the 131st anniversary of the Federal observance of Labor Day, we call to mind our own role in standing up for economic justice even as we demand proper leadership from those in positions of political and societal power.

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The Jewish Labor Committee lovingly calls the Shabbat of Labor Day Weekend “Labor on the Bima,” and it is the honor of KAM Isaiah Israel to welcome our guest speaker, Michael Perry.

Mike is the chair of the Chicago Jewish Labor Committee, an organization that serves as the link between the trade union movement and the Jewish community. He has served on the national boards of the JLC as well as the Labor Zionist Alliance and the Jewish Forward. Mike has also chaired the Jewish Community Relations Council’s Domestic Affairs Task Force of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

Mike currently works as Director of Education and Employee Involvement at Council 31 of AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, a union representing 75,000 members in Illinois state and local government. Prior to working at AFSCME, he served as the Executive Director of the national Jewish Labor Committee in New York.

Please join me in welcoming Mike Perry.

³ Quoted in Feldstein, *Rabbi Jacob J. Weinstein*, pp. 135-136.